



Vicious Vows

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Inheriting my father's business means that my life will become even more dangerous.

But I wasn't prepared for a woman as brilliant at deception as she is. Micah DeSantis...

Ten years younger and strikingly beautiful.

She's trouble in a pretty little package.

More importantly, I know I'm in trouble when I lay my eyes on her.

In more ways than one...

Beating her at her own game means that I have to cage her.

Micah is going to be my wife whether she wants to or not.

Our evil vows at the wedding seal our hatred forever.

We're out for blood.

But my heart wants to protect her from forces more ruthless than me.

Especially if our vicious vows turn into a real dark fairytale romance...

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MICAH

My fingers race over the keyboard as fast as I can go without making errors in my typing. I've never tested myself, but it has to be somewhere in the vicinity of seventy words per minute. I can feel the sweat on my temples that runs down past my ears. The adrenaline surge threatens to make my heart explode, but I can't stop now. One wrong keystroke and they'll catch me.

"Come one, Micah." Will, my best friend and cohort in this illegal game we're playing, sits at his laptop next to mine in the back room of my father's jewelry shop. We're supposed to be running inventory numbers for him, but I like to fiddle with some hacking. And by fiddle, I mean move money from other people's accounts into my father's in untraceable ways that look totally legitimate.

"I'm trying, okay?" I snap, feeling rushed and panicked. This could very possibly be the most dangerous thing I've ever done, and it sort of terrifies me a little.

Okay, so I don't steal from anyone who doesn't deserve it. Only the man who has made my father's life a living hell for at least the past three years, probably longer, though Dad will never admit that. He tries to play nice with the Mob, but this new guy they have in charge is really scaring him. He's not like the previous leader.

"Fuck, the buffer overflow..."

"I see it," he responds, clicking away on his keyboard. "They're in. They know we're

here.” Sweat drips from his forehead and nose as he stares at his computer screen, but even my quick glance in his direction could be deadly for me. One mistake... that’s all it would take.

“Shit,” I hiss, my fingers moving faster. I’ve been doing this for months now, harvesting as much information as I could from their system to find the vulnerabilities and moving money when they least expect it. They’ve never once caught on to me, but they must have a new guy, someone who knows his stuff. “Will! Will...”

“Yeah, I got it,” he says, and I see the string of code he slaps out there to attempt to mask what I’m doing. The deeper we get into this, the easier it is to see when we’re being watched and tracked.

“Micah, dear...” I hear Dad calling my name, and I don’t even look up. I can’t leave this program up with what I’ve done or they’ll be able to track everything I’ve done right back to this location.

“The VPN, Will...” My half-barked order sent his way may mean nothing to anyone else, but we’ve worked together since college doing this. He knows how to cover my tracks. Our private network is being traced, and I’m too busy in the system to make sure they can’t peel back the layers of this onion.

“Got it. Shit, they’re close.”

We work feverishly, hunched over the glowing screens, focused on every single line of code. I have to make these assholes pay for what they’ve been doing. And it’s not just my father, either. They’ve come into our neighborhood with their guns and threats. They make us launder money, distribute drugs for them, and I’ve heard stories about them forcing women into prostitution, though I’ve never been pressured to do that. But then, I’ve been away at college for the most part until recently, only

home on weekends to help Dad around the shop.

“Come on, come on!” Will is antsy, and I understand why. The firewalls were only the beginning of our problem. They’ve updated security in their system since the last time we siphoned money. We got nearly a half a million that time. This time, we’re only trying to scab about a quarter million, but we’re racing against someone who knows what they’re doing.

But they don’t know what I know.

“We’re running out of time. They’re gonna shut us out.”

“Shh,” I snap. “I’m thinking.” Even as my brain tries to compute what’s going on, my fingers move faster. “Just a little finagling and... Bam!” I grin like a madwoman as I watch the numbers shifting on the screen, money draining from their account and rolling right over to Dad’s. “That’s how it’s done.”

Will still hovers, as do I. Our job isn’t finished until we back out cleanly and leave no breadcrumbs. They can’t have a single trace of our code left, and we have to cover our IP address. It’s only successful if we don’t get caught.

“Modifying the log files...” My fingers fly faster than ever.

“Deleting our tracks... Shit, Micah, we really did it again.” He sounds positively giddy as he continues to type.

“Did you ever doubt me? They don’t call me lightning fingers for nothin’.” I snicker at him and start to relax a little as I see our trail of dust vanish into thin air.

With Will’s help, I manage to back out slowly and cleanly. We power down the software, and I shut my laptop just as Dad walks into the back room with a box in

hand. He looks at me for a split second and rolls his eyes at me.

“You did it again?” he asks, his lips puckering up into a scowl.

I sit a little straighter, no longer intimidated by his disapproval. As a little girl, all he had to do was give me a stern expression and I was reduced to tears. But this is for his good. He just has to trust me on this. I didn’t go to college for computer programming simply to update his computer software. And while I didn’t realize how far the reach of my skill would go or how it would be tested, I’m glad I got the degree I chose. He needs someone to look out for him.

“Hey, Mr. DeSantis,” Will says, offering a wave and wiggling his fingers as he shuts his own laptop. Will, three years younger than me and still finishing his degree, has been my sidekick for a while now. We’re not dating, just friends—since he’s seriously gay—but I’d consider him the closest thing I have to a partner.

“Micah, they’re going to catch you. What will they do then?” Dad sets the box on the small work table behind us, and I pause to look at it. Probably another shipment of jewelry to put into one of the large display cases out front. These shelves are filled with custom pieces he has his jewelers creating for clients and customers, as well as pieces that are being cleaned, restored, or repaired by him.

I slide my laptop off the table and into the padded, black case I carry it in and shrug my shoulder. “Dad, they’re not going to catch us. We know what we’re doing. Besides, they have it coming. They steal, rob, and kill all the time. Just consider me Robin Hood.” I like the idea that I can steal from someone so powerful and wealthy and give to the poor—or my father, who isn’t entirely poor. Not anymore, at least. He has seven hundred fifty thousand dollars in his accounts now, thanks to me. And this business doesn’t do too badly, either.

“I’m worried they will know it’s you. You’re not afraid of them, but you should be.”

His firm warning comes from experience. I've seen him come home with a black eye a time or two. He knows how they send warnings. They've probably threatened to kill him or take me or Nathan, my younger brother.

I stand and sling my bag over my shoulder, crossways over my chest. "Inventory is done." I lean forward and peck Dad on the cheek, and Will stands to follow me, hefting his own powerful laptop in its case. "If you want, I can open a new account and get the money out of yours. You deserve it, though. You shouldn't have to worry about them breathing down your neck."

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Ever since Mom died, Dad has spent his life building this jewelry store up to what it is. I hate that a man who knows nothing, who hasn't lifted a finger to help us, can walk in here and profit off us. And we hoped when the old man died suddenly of a heart attack that they'd leave us alone. But they found a new leader quickly, and his men have been here three times this week alone to collect what they think is theirs. Meanwhile, we're the ones who take all the risk.

If the police found out we were laundering money through this shop, they'd arrest my father, not the man responsible. I'd like to meet him just so I can give him a piece of my mind, but men like him are untouchable. He's probably sitting somewhere, holed up with his bitches and a lot of whiskey, smoking cigars and laughing at all the people he micromanages.

"I just want you to be careful. That's all, dear." Dad cups my cheek and pats it. "You're just as beautiful as your mother, smarter than she was. But you're a risk taker, Micah. You're going to get caught, and you're going to have to face the consequences. I'd rather you just quit while we're ahead. It's not worth it."

My heart squeezes in my chest. I love my Dad, but he's wrong. These people have to pay. It's totally worth the risk. Besides, I won't be caught. I'm the best at what I do. I didn't graduate from some shitty state college. I was Magna Cum Laude at MIT, for Christ's sake.

"I know what I'm doing, Dad." I peck him on the cheek again and gesture at Will. "Come on. Let's go celebrate. After that, I think I can afford the fro-yo." I wink at him, and he follows me out.

“See ya, Mr. DeSantis!” he calls as the bell over the door to the store chimes.

The sun is hot as our sneakers slap the pavement. He falls into step beside me, and I turn north on Broadway to head toward our favorite ice cream parlor. I have a skip in my step as we walk. The feeling of victory after a race like that always gets my juices flowing.

“So, what do you think we should do with the money?” I ask Will, thinking about how we could help spruce up the neighborhood a little. The woman who owns the pet shop a few doors down from Dad’s jewelry store needs a new awning over the front of her store. Maybe we could do that.

“Not sure what you want to do with yours, but when summer break is up, I have to pay my tuition for my last year. MIT isn’t cheap.” He tugs his computer bag strap over his head so it matches mine, falling crossways over his chest. “I think your dad needs a new hat. The one he’s wearing now has a hole in it.”

I nod at a petite woman who walks past with her toy poodle. She’s polite, unlike most New Yorkers. Will’s astute observation is a bit misguided, though. “Dad wears that hat because it belonged to his father. Poppy had a strong sense of style, and I think Dad thinks wearing that hat will bring him good fortune. So, good luck getting him to wear a different one.”

We strut up to the corner, standing in the shade of the buildings, and I push the walk button on the lamp post. The “don’t walk” signal flashes, preparing pedestrians to cross when the light turns, but a few folks look both ways and scurry across the street illegally, anyway.

“Ah... Well, I still think he’d like a new hat. And I think you need a new computer. That one is getting a workout.” He nudges my computer bag and chuckles, and I turn to roll my eyes at him, and as I do, I hear tires squealing.

I whip around to see a car jerk to a stop near the curb. My heart slams against my ribcage as three large, black-clad men jump out with guns in their hands, pointed at me.

“Fuck,” I hear Will mutter, and I reach for him, but he’s gone, racing up the street like I should be, but my feet are stuck to the ground, cemented in place.

“Get in the car, bitch,” one of the men says, and I think I may vomit.

This can’t be happening.

2

LUKE

I hold my mother against my chest tightly. Her shoulders shake with her sobs as she cries into my chest. It’s hard to lose someone you love, but to lose the partner you built your entire life with so suddenly must feel like having your own heart torn out. Dad’s death shocked us all—found dead in his shower after an early morning heart attack. But I don’t get the luxury of grieving the way others may.

“I miss him, Luciano...” Using my given name rather than the informal “Luke” which other people refer to me as is common for her. Her heart is rooted in the homeland, where her parents still live, and where she may end up before this is all said and done. She spent fifty years with the same man building this life, and now he’s gone. After losing my brother when he was just a teen, she’s seen a lot of grief and pain.

“We all miss him, Mom.” I slide my hands to her shoulders and pry her away from my body. I’d stand here holding her all day if I knew it would really take her pain away, but nothing will truly ease the ache other than time and creating new habits and

patterns.

Mourning someone is difficult. Rising above it and moving on is the only way to respect and honor my father's memory. I'll never tell my mother she can't wallow in self-pity and sorrow, though I'll help her see that life isn't over for those who remain. Still, I have a job to do, one that won't wait for anyone. If I don't take the reins of this family and get things under control, we'll go belly up in no time.

"Why don't you let Gabriel take you home, Mom?" The pain in her eyes as I look into them says it all. She doesn't want to go home, unless home is wherever my father is, but short of a freak accident or tragedy, I'm not sending her there any time soon. She's ten years younger than he was and still in the prime of her life at sixty-five.

"Yes, okay..." She sighs and her chin drops. "Will you stop by for dinner?" The handkerchief she has worried between her fragile fingers is moist with tears, and she folds it before dabbing her face again.

"I'll try to. I have to see to some business today. You know Dad would expect me to keep things in line before relaxing. But if I can't make it I will at least call you this evening." I kiss her forehead and nod at Gabriel, her personal driver and bodyguard. The man, in his late fifties, has been by her side the better part of a decade, and oftentimes, I think there might be a spark between them, but I'd never whisper a word of it. Dad had his mistresses. Mom is entitled to some comfort now.

She nods and turns, her steps light as she crosses the room toward Gabriel. His hand is outstretched toward her, a warm smile on his face. I watch them pause at the doorway before stepping into the bustling hallway beyond. As they disappear from my view, I move to take a seat behind my desk, ready to receive whatever news they bring. Within seconds, Christopher bursts through the door with a sense of urgency, shutting it behind him. Striding confidently toward my desk, he holds a tablet in one hand and his appearance exudes power and control. Despite being my head of

security, he always dresses as if he's vying for my position.

“Sir, we have the hacker. They’re enroute.” He slides his tablet across my desk with the screen lit up. The numbers don’t lie. This hacker has cost me nearly a million dollars in the past week alone, and that’s not counting the months of skimming we discovered when my new computer tech did an audit of our systems.

“Who is it? What’s his name?” I draw the tablet across my desk to look more closely at it. It’s only information, numbers, account names, and dates of transactions. This person made it look good too, like I willingly and knowingly transferred these large amounts to the accounts listed here. I look up at Christopher and scowl. How did we miss this? How did Dad miss this?

“Name is Micah DeSantis. All we know is it’s related to that jewelry store on Broadway that cleans our cash.” He stands with one hand clasped around the opposite wrist with his shoulders squared. I can’t blame him for not knowing. He’s not the type to get into the details of my finances. He watches my casino to make sure things here are secure.

I’m not sure whom to blame, anyway. Dad was so old-fashioned that he hardly got into the tech game at all. Everything here is done analog, including cash drops at the bank every night and armored vehicles to move large amounts of money. He had no interest in going digital until I forced him into it following a heist attempt by our enemies. That was more than ten years ago, and now the entire world is digital.

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“DeSantis...” The name rolls off my tongue as I say it a few times, wondering what a jewelry store owner would be doing trying to siphon money from my accounts. I know I’ve sent my guys to every business we work through in the past two months a few times. Maybe he got spooked? Or maybe he thinks I’m weaker than my old man since I haven’t shown my face yet. I’m too busy to do these visits myself, what with trying to bring the entire casino into the Twenty-First Century and all.

“Bring him in here.” I drop the tablet onto my desk and push it away. The hollow thud echoes around the mostly empty room. I spend most of my time at my home office now, and I haven’t even had a chance to redecorate or add my touch to Dad’s space here.

“Yes, sir,” he replies and then turns and walks out the door.

I drum my fingers across the smooth wood of the desk as I wait. I’m not pleased about having to spill blood in this office so soon after Dad’s death, but this DeSantis fellow will prove to be a decent example to anyone else who thinks of crossing me. I’m not sure if it’s the shop owner or his son—I heard he has a son—but either one will do. I just want my money back. And I want everyone who does business with me to know I’m more ruthless than my father.

Restless and agitated, I fight the urge to march down to the floor and out to the back parking lot, eager to confront the situation head on. But I rein in my impulses and remain seated, determined to make a power move like I’ve seen my father do countless times before. He never chased after people. They always came to him. And now, I’ll make them come to me as well. The tension in the room is palpable, like a weight pressing down on my shoulders. I wait for the inevitable showdown, willing

myself to maintain control and composure.

When the door swings open, I turn my eyes to watch, thinking I'll see a bedraggled older man who begs for his life. Instead, I see something I don't expect. A young woman, probably in her mid-twenties, with jet-black hair and stunning blue eyes stumbles through the door, pushed by someone behind her. Mark and Tony follow her in, shoulder to shoulder. Mark carries a bag in his hand about the size of a laptop—the type of tool she'd need to do her hacking.

“Well, Ms. DeSantis, I assume?” I stand and button my jacket, tucking my navy blue tie inside.

She yanks her arm away from Mark's grasp and pushes her long black hair out of her face. The waves frame her porcelain skin perfectly. Heart-shaped lips draw up into an angry scowl, and all I can think is how gorgeous she is. Her T-shirt hugs her curves, revealing a nice rack, and the jeans she wears hug her thighs, leaving nothing to the imagination.

“Let me go, you sick fuck.” Her eyes dart around the room frantically. She's looking for a way out, some escape from my fury that's hidden from view, but she'll find nothing. The only way out is through the door she entered, and Vic stands there with his shoulders squared and his arms folded over his barrel chest.

“Given how fond you are of my company and its resources, I thought you'd be happier to meet me.” With a flick of a hand, I dismiss my men. Mark sets the computer bag on my desk and the men retreat, shutting the door behind themselves. I'm sure they probably think I'm crazy. Maybe they expected me to put on a show for them, and maybe I should have.

But this shocking turn of events makes me want this privacy with her for the moment. She's brilliant behind a keyboard, stunning to look at, and I bet her pussy feels as

good as I imagine it does. She might make good arm candy if she can be tamed into submission, but as feisty as she seems—which, don't get me wrong, I like it—she may give me a run for my money. This is the sort of woman I see myself with, and since she owes me a substantial debt, I may just own her.

“Why would I be happy to meet the man who controls my father like a pet? You're a piece of trash, you know? Men like you deserve the chair.” Micah runs a hand through her hair, and I see her eyes dart to the computer bag on my desk. She's making a plan to run, but she won't get far. Not with my three best men on the other side of that door.

“Please, sit.” I'm very interested in her now. I fully expected a twenty-something man right out of college, trying to make a power play. Not her, not this. I gesture at the uncomfortable red sofa I haven't had time to remove and move in that direction. She glances at the computer bag and glares at me.

“Let me go. I have no interest in speaking with you.” I watch her hastily march over to the desk and pick up her laptop and waltz toward the door, thinking she's going to walk right out of here, but she turns around quickly when Vic points his gun at her and shuts the door again. “You can't keep me here. I have rights.”

“You have nerve. I'll give you that.” I sit on the couch and pat the cushion next to me. There are so many things I could do with her talent and spunk. So many things I could do to that body, too. “But unless you return my money, you belong to me.”

“You can't do that.” She waves her arms around and then drops them to her sides, and then her hands slap her thighs. “Let me go.”

She's going to be difficult. I like a challenge. “Mark!” I shout, and in less than a second, he's in the doorway with the door open, ready for my commands. My men are trained to be at my beck and call at all times. I never wait more than a few

seconds for a reply.

“Take her to the house. Put her in the room and lock it. She’ll learn or she’ll pay.” I fold my hands together in my lap and cross one leg over the other as I watch her struggle against his grasp. “Oh, and take her computer too. No need for her to be able to steal more of my money.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, snatching her computer away from her gasp as she screams profanities and pummels his chest with her fists.

Poor thing has spent all her time building up her intelligence and skill and zero time strengthening her body. She’ll regret that. And I’ll capitalize on all of it. I just have to decide how to go about it. Micah DeSantis is my new lucky charm, and she doesn’t even know it yet.

3

MICAH

The meathead Luke Santoro put in charge of me manhandles me like I’m an object and not a human being. He conveniently drags me downstairs and out the back door, careful to avoid any casino patrons on the way, while his buddies clear the way and follow behind us to make sure I don’t slip away. I’m not even dangerous. It’s not like I’m going to steal a gun and kill someone. I just use my computer to write code and move money.

“Fucking let me go!” I pound at his arms, but he’s relentless. He tosses me into the trunk of a car, not even the fucking back seat like before, and I’m plunged into darkness.

The car bumps along the roads going God only knows where, wherever “the house”

is. That's what Luke called it. Probably his house, probably hidden somewhere so his enemies don't learn where he lives and threaten him. I'm sure he has enemies. A man like that doesn't make friends easily unless the person is intimidated or terrified of him.

My head smacks something hard, and I wince and shut my eyes as my hand shoots up to cover the sore spot. Luke Santoro isn't who I thought he was. When Dad told me the old man—Giancarlo Santoro, Luke's father—had suddenly died, I thought they'd gotten one of his brothers to take over. I expected the man in charge to be my father's age or older. Not some hot playboy in his thirties.

I pound the bottom side of the trunk and scream out for help, but out on the highway or city street, there isn't a chance in hell someone will ever hear me. I'm just bruising my own hand and making my voice hoarse for no reason. I relax and fold my arms over my chest and wait.

We drive long enough that I almost fall asleep, stopping a few places, where I manage to bang on the trunk. Still, no one comes to help me, and I don't know if they'll ever let me out of here. I even pull my cell out of my pocket and attempt a call, but there is no service. I don't know if it's from the metal box I'm in or the location in the city. I jam my phone back into my pocket and lie here seething.

Finally, after what seems like hours, the car stops and the trunk pops. I waste no time pushing it up and bolting out of the trunk. The latch scrapes my back, and I only make it a few stumbled steps before I slam into the broad chest of yet another black-clad man. This one has tattoos all the way down both arms and a few on his face to match, and he doesn't look happy.

"Take her to the room, Vic," one of the men from the car orders, and Vic grunts and jerks his head upward. It's a smug gesture with so much left unsaid, yet everyone knows what it means. His hands latch onto me in a fierce grip that threatens to stain

my skin blue and purple with bruises.

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He drags me toward the door, and I don't even take time to get my bearings, to look around or see where I am. It's a private place, out of the city, and all I really see are evergreen bushes and trees. I'm at a massive brick home with a private drive, and when the muscled man finally gets tired of my kicking and writhing, he wraps his arm around my waist and crates me like a sack of potatoes.

"Do you always do everything you're told, Vic? I'm here against my will." My arms are pinned alongside my body, so I can't fight back, and he isn't even straining to lug me around with just the one thick bicep in my face. "You're an accessory to a kidnapping, you know? I could hack right into the police department files and put your picture there as the suspect."

He looks down at me with a scowl and a wrinkled forehead. I don't know whether he doesn't speak English or he's just thick, but he's pissing me off.

"Your boss took me off the street and threw me into a car. I deserve a trial or something before I'm just locked up." No matter how hard I jerk or kick, his grip remains firm, even when he carries me up a flight of steps and down a long hallway. My angry rationalization isn't working with him, and I'm feeling more and more out of control by the second. "You don't have to do this. You can let me go and I won't tell a soul." Who would I tell, anyway? The police? Santoro has them in his back pocket, or at least that's what my father said.

Fuck, my father... Who will tell him? What will he think?

I feel desperation seeping in, and I'm grasping at straws, and at his back, hoping I feel a weapon there, but there's nothing. Even if there was, I've only fired a gun a

few times in my life. I'm not sure I'd know what to do, and would I even have the guts to shoot someone in cold blood, even if it meant my survival? I'm not a killer like these people. I'm just a college graduate who pissed off the Mafia.

"Put me down," I shout, and then I lean forward and sink my teeth into his abs as he turns a corner. I bite down hard, hoping to draw blood, but his muscles are rock hard beneath the skin and all I manage to do is piss him off.

"Bitch!" he snaps, grabbing my hair with his other hand and pulling my face away from his side. I'm shocked that he doesn't strike me. He seems like the type to do that sort of thing, and I wince in preparation, but the blow never comes.

"Let me go!" My throat is sore from screaming and I'm out of breath from fighting, but these assholes don't even seem to notice that I'm suffering. They don't care. They want me to suffer and beg for relief. I'm scared of what else they may do to me.

My neck strains, tilting back at an unnatural angle as I am violently thrust toward the ground. My body feels weightless for a moment before crashing down onto the unforgiving wooden floor. The impact jolts through my bones, sending a wave of pain through my entire being. The thin cream-colored throw rug provides minimal cushioning against the hard surface below. As I struggle to get up, he mercilessly kicks out my arms, causing me to collapse once again. My face slams into the ground, and I feel a sharp sting radiating from my cheek and jaw. A tingling numbness follows, leaving me disoriented and vulnerable.

"Stay there," he barks, and then he retreats and slams the door shut.

I jump to my feet and race to the door. "No, no, no, no..." I jiggle the handle and try turning it, but it's locked and I'm stuck. "Fuck!" I say, smacking the door with an open palm. I make a fist and pound, screaming at the door for someone to come let me out, but I scream until I'm out of breath and probably blue in the face and no one

comes. I don't even hear when his footsteps retreat away, which means the room may be soundproofed, anyway.

Tired, I press my forehead to the door and sigh. Then I think of my phone again. They never took it from me, and it was still more than two-thirds charged up. I pull it from my pocket and think about calling the police but think twice. I committed a crime. I hacked into Santoro's business accounts and transferred money from those accounts to my father's. If I involve the police, Dad gets none of the money, and we risk both of us going to jail. And on top of that, Santoro will probably kill him and Nathan.

"Dammit!" The word bursts from my lips in a sharp hiss, echoing off the walls of the empty room. I curse again, frustration seeping into every syllable as I take in my surroundings. There is no one here to hear me complain, no one to witness the turmoil churning within me. My hands tremble as I reach for my phone, desperate for some form of help. The thought of calling the police crosses my mind, but I quickly dismiss it. Instead, I turn to the one person who has always been there for me—my father.

I press the icon for my calling app and then his contact set to speed dial, and I hold the phone to my ear as I turn to take in the room for the first time as it rings through. It's nicely decorated, creams and pastels, with a floral comforter and pillowcases. It's not my style, though. And the wood floors look like they've been well-maintained. From what I gather from my hasty trip up to this room, the house is older, Victorian, maybe, and well taken care of.

"Micah! Oh, dear, I was worried sick. Will came by here. He said some men stopped. Did you get away?" Dad is frantic, and why wouldn't he be? I'm glad Will got away and told Dad what happened.

"Did you call the police?" I snap, not thinking about his feelings. If we don't handle

this properly, I'll go to prison, and even though prison is better than death, I feel like if Santoro was going to kill me, he'd have done it already.

"No, baby, I didn't." Dad sounds ashamed, as if he knows it's the right thing but can't bring himself to do it.

"Good, don't." I walk to the dresser and start opening drawers, hoping I'll find something hidden in one of them that will help me pick the lock. "Police are bad in this situation. I'm fine. They haven't harmed me. I just don't want to go to prison for hacking to siphon money, okay?" None of the drawers have a single thing in them. The damn dresser is for show only.

"I won't call them... But..." Dad's voice cracks as he speaks, and I know what he's thinking. He's terrified for me.

"But nothing. Don't call them." I take a cleansing breath and move toward the closet to open the doors. "I'll be fine, Dad. Tell Will not to hack anything until I'm out. I don't want him trying to figure out a way to get me back and getting caught." I pull the doors open to reveal an empty closet too. It's like they prepared this room just to hold prisoners or hostages.

"Baby, you have to listen to them. Do exactly what they say..." I hear him tearing up, being a good father whose daughter is trapped by the Mob.

My gaze falls upon the solitary window in the room, and I move with fierce determination toward it. The thought of breaking through and escaping to the freedom below spurs me on. But as I reach the window, my heart sinks at the sight of iron bars blocking any hope of a quick escape. Deflated, I mutter a curse under my breath.

"I can handle myself, but you need to protect yourself now. Move the money. Get it

out of the bank and put it into a private account or buy investments. Fuck, just bury it in the back yard in a coffee can, but don't leave it where it is."

"Micah..." I hear Nathan in the background. No doubt, he's worried too. Then I hear footsteps outside the room.

"I gotta go. Hide the money, Dad." My fingers shake as I end the call with my father and make sure my phone is on silent. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself before running back to the door and starting to bang on it with all my might. The sound echoes through the empty hallway, but I don't care. Eventually, Santoro will have to come back here and face me. And when he does, I'll demand that he let me go.

4

LUKE

Normally, when I enter my home in the evening after a hard day of work, it's silent, only the sound of dinner being prepared or served in the kitchen by my wait staff or the vacuum being run by the maid. Today, however, there is a racket of banging and shouting that echoes down the stairwell and wraps around me to greet me. Micah isn't happy with her new accommodations, though she doesn't get the right to complain. In my world, she's lucky to be alive and able to scream like that.

"Sir, I've taken the liberty of pouring your drink and showing Mr. Sanders into your den." The butler gestures at the open door of my den, and I nod at him.

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“Thank you. Please hold dinner until I’m finished with this meeting. I may have company, if you couldn’t hear that. And if not, she’ll need a plate in her room.” Unbuttoning my suit jacket, I walk past him and duck into my den where Jacob Sanders, my financial planner and the man responsible for pointing out my father’s oversight of the embezzlement going on right under his nose, sits comfortably on my couch sipping a glass of some sort of liquor. His eyebrows rise in greeting as he swallows the tart amber liquid from the glass, and then he raises it to me.

“Luke, I have good news...”

Not many people call me by my first name. Jacob is one of the very few, and only because we’ve known each other longer than I’ve had any power or influence. I sit across from him and take the second tumbler full of whiskey off the glass-top table between us and sip it, waiting for him to go on.

“Since Dale tracked that hacker issue you had, we aren’t losing any more money, and the recent loss of a quarter mil can be returned easily. You got him?” he asks, eyeing me over the rim of the glass as he finishes his drink.

“Her,” I grunt, still surprised by the fact that our hacker problem came in such a hot package. Micah DeSantis makes my dick hard just thinking about her, and I cross one leg over the other to camouflage it.

“A woman? Tell me she’s not the one I’ve been hearing...” His gaze lifts to the ceiling where for now, things are silent.

“She’s been a vocal companion this afternoon, I take it?” I can imagine her being

pissed off, trashing the room, screaming and stomping. But it won't do her any good. That room is impenetrable and impossible to break out of. Not even with her hacking skills. I hired the best security guys in the industry to make sure of it. I tend to keep my guests who are a little reluctant to stay with me in that room for safekeeping.

"Hmm, you know that's a class-one felony?"

"So is murder one," I say, staring at him. "I've never been caught and I don't intend to. Besides, she doesn't want the police involved any more than I do. She's a hacker who embezzled nearly a million dollars from me, Jason. She'll play nice or she'll get the shaft, and I won't even have to do any of the hard work." The whiskey goes down smoothly, coating my throat in a sweet and tart film that leaves a strong aftertaste.

Jason sits quietly, not responding to my comment. He knows how this game works despite running a very clean business. His finance firm has managed to stay out of the organization run by my father, though only narrowly, and his decision to finally join me was precipitated by this latest scandal in the making. But more so because he couldn't wait to stick it to John Greenbeck, who was my father's finance guy, who missed the embezzlement entirely. The man was worthless.

"What would you say to a little scheme of our own?" The thought had been rolling around in my mind all afternoon after meeting the beautiful Micah DeSantis—a gorgeous hacker who stole from the Mob then basically spat in my face when I caught her.

Jason leans forward on the couch and sets his empty glass on the table. His gaze drifts, grazing the Italian leather furniture, the large mahogany desk where I do business from home, and the tapestry hung on the wall as a decoration, but mostly to hide my safe. He tents his fingers and then looks back at me.

"What sort of scheme are you thinking?" His face is stern. He's not the type of person

to get tangled up in illegal activity, but doing what I'm thinking of doing won't be easy to hide from the man who advises me how to invest my money or where to put it when it's made.

I sip my drink and focus on his face, wondering just how far is too far for him. "We can use our hacker's skills against our enemies." I let the words hang in the air as I finish my drink and then loosen my tie as I set the empty glass next to his.

He chuckles dryly and shakes his head. "Do you ever have a legitimate business idea?" He asks the question in jest, but he knows the truth. I don't ever think by the books. Rules were made to contain the weak and to challenge the strong. Those who find a way around the rules and stay free men are the strongest, wisest men alive. And I am nearing my fortieth birthday as a free man living a life of organized crime. The power behind that truth is enough to scare the daylights out of even the most powerful authorities. I know what I'm doing, and I don't get caught doing it.

"I run a casino..." My legitimate business is a front for money laundering and prostitution, but most casinos are.

"Yes, but gambling only became legal in New York State in 2013. That's nearly two hundred and fifty years as a country before your 'business' was legal. So is it really?—"

"Jason," I mewl, cutting him off, "you're splitting hairs. What I do is so fine-tuned no one will ever suspect it. And if our organization can lose nearly a million dollars to a hacker who moved the money right under our noses, how much more can we, who never get caught, do with that talent?"

It makes perfect sense. And it flows together with my personal motto well. If you can do less work for the same profit, do it. This venture would be zero work for us and all profit, and if the code Micah writes is bad, she's the fall guy. No loss on our part, and

we can claim to our enemies from whom we steal that it happened to us too. It's a win-win.

As Jason stewes over it, thinking it over, I think about Micah. She's young, but she's brilliant and strikingly attractive. Someone with her skill and talent should've been snatched up by someone like me long ago. She's been hiding, out of town or something. Her father probably kept her that way so my father's men wouldn't snatch her up, or she'd be in my casino right now working tricks.

But I don't see her like that. She's not a trick to me. Strangely enough, she's the woman who stole from me then looked me in the eye and laughed, and with gusto, she put me in my place. She's my match—call it a twin flame or a soul mate, whatever you'd like. We are the same, Micah and me, and I want to see her in action. Maybe she won't be the fall guy. Maybe she'll be my little secret weapon, and maybe I'll be able to enjoy more than just her talents.

"I need to go pay our little hacker a visit. See yourself out," I tell him as I stand and straighten my tie, tightening it back up.

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." I wink at him, knowing that leaves very little for him to worry about. There isn't anything I won't do for a buck, and convincing this little vixen to work her magic on the keyboard for me should be simple. I'll kill her family if she doesn't cooperate. That's usually incentive enough.

I move toward the door, putting that conversation behind me, but I hear his thoughtful words call after me. "You know she's smart, Luke. She's smart enough to do exactly what you want her to—steal from them, put money in your account, keep some for herself, and frame you for it all. I'd be careful."

His words linger in my mind as I mount the stairs and head up the hall toward my prepared room. It's quiet. She's given up her banging and settled down for the time being. That's a good thing. I want to discuss this business proposition with her while it's still fresh in my mind, while she's angry and desperate to do anything to get away from me. She'll be more likely to agree. And I need her to be compliant or we'll accomplish nothing.

Reaching into my shirt, I pull the key from the chain around my neck and unlock the door. As it swings open, it reveals Micah, sprawled out on her bed with her phone in hand. The lights are off, but whatever app she has on her screen illuminates her face. I flip the switch up as she sits up and locks her phone.

"About time you came to get me. Am I going home now?" The screaming may have stopped, but the angry glare and the divot between her eyebrows remain. She scoots to the edge of the bed, and I see her shoeless feet, stockinged and dangling off the side of the mattress.

I pull the chair into the room from its spot outside the door where my guard usually sits if needed and spin it around to face her, though I remain close to the open door. As I sit down, I loosen my tie again. I could've left it loosened after my chat downstairs, but I want her to think I'm relaxing around her, letting my guard down. She has to think she's got some sort of power or she won't compromise with me.

"You're going to have a conversation with me about our future together, and then we'll discuss home." What she doesn't know is that home will likely be here for a while. I'm not sure if she considers her father's place home or if she has her own place, but all of that changes now. I'll have to keep a close eye on her.

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“I have nothing to say to you. You are a piece of trash, Santoro. You can’t just walk into my father’s business and bully him into laundering your money and handing out your drugs. He could go to prison for that if the cops find out.” Her fingers work feverishly, twirling her hair around and around until she ties it in a knot on top of her head. She’s even prettier with the loosely dangling strands of black hair framing her face like that and her neck exposed. My teeth itch to sink into her skin.

“I have that all covered, Ms. DeSantis. Do you think I can’t protect my assets?” I know she doesn’t doubt me at all. That’s fear in her eyes, fear of what I’m capable of doing to her. And it’s arousing to see her tremble and try to hide it.

“My father isn’t your property.” Her scowl deepens, and I chuckle. She’s so feisty, it’s turning me on. Not too many people would have this much fight in them when faced with someone like me. Kudos to this little princess for having more balls than my own men.

“I said, asset, not object.” I cross one leg over the other and wait for her reply, which comes instantly, in a very tart and hostile tone. There’s a storm brewing in her expression, and when she unleashes, I’m mildly surprised by her intellect.

“By definition of the word ‘asset’, you are calling my father an object. Now, if you don’t mind. I’d like to go make sure he’s okay. He’s old and not able to care for himself very well anymore.”

Micah stands and jams her feet into the tennis shoes on the floor beside the bed, and I watch calmly as she walks toward me, attempting to pass by me and out the door, but I capture her around the waist and pull her onto my lap. There’s no denying the

raging erection I have, which her hot ass has given me. She squirms and pulls at my hand, trying to free herself, but it only makes my cock want her more. And all the friction of her hips grinding against my lap only makes my cock harder, and her awareness of that fact all the more real.

“Now, as I was saying, we have to discuss your future here.” If I could take her now, I would, but I prefer my women to be obedient.

She slaps my hand and says, “What is that supposed to mean?” She spits as she talks, so flustered and enraged that she doesn’t care how foolish she looks struggling against me. I’m twice her size. This is almost comical.

“It means you’re going to use your talents for me now. You’ll hack whom I say you will, and you’ll move money how, when, and where I say you will.” The more she fights me, the more aroused I get, but that’s not why I’m here this evening. Though, if she doesn’t watch it, I may teach her a lesson or two, anyway.

“Hell no. You can’t do that to me.” Her hands curl into fists, and she begins to pummel my arm as if that’s going to keep me from holding her down. She’s only hurting herself. She’ll wake with bruised arms and hands and wonder why she even tried to fight me.

“Hmm... Then Daddy Dearest dies.” I stand, carrying her with me as she continues her assault, and when I drop her onto the bed, she bounces and a yelp of surprise escapes her lips. “Think about it, sweetheart. You don’t really have a choice now, do you?”

Genuine shock on her face makes me smirk with satisfaction. Her eyebrows are high, eyes wide, and she gasps in anger and rebellion. She just doesn’t realize she isn’t getting a choice at all. When people come into my world, they do as I say or they leave in a body bag. It would be a shame to waste such beauty on an early death, but I

have to keep my public image up as the most ruthless man in the city.

Turning, I reach for the door handle, and she hurls her shoes at me one at a time. They soar through the air and crash into the wall on either side of me, creating two loud thuds that reverberate through the small room. I quickly step through and shut the door and lock it, hoping to contain her anger. But then I hear another sound—something smashing against the door from the other side. It's probably the chair I brought in to sit on. The rest of the furniture in the room is firmly bolted down, a precaution to prevent any further destruction.

Poor little Micah, frustrated and worked up. Perhaps I should give her some time to calm down and think things over before taking any further actions. I have faith that she will eventually come around, but if she doesn't... well, she'll just have to stay where she is for now.

5

MICAH

He can't do this! I have a legitimate job and a life, neither of which involve criminal activity. I slam my fists into the door even as I kick aside the bits of broken chair that lie on the ground at my feet. I didn't get a degree in computer programming to be manipulated into using my skills in the criminal underworld. I won't let them do to me what they've done to my father.

“Let me out, asshole!” My fists bang the door over and over. My voice is hoarse, barely able to squeak out words, and I'm furious.

They took me because I stole their money, and something tells me if they'd have nabbed Will, they'd have just killed him. I'm alive because I have tits and for no other reason. After hearing the horror stories about what men like him do to women

like me, I'm lucky I'm here and that my hacking skills are all he wants—for now. God only knows what else he has in mind.

After exhausting myself at the door, screaming profanities, and bruising my hands further, I collapse on the bed again. I turn toward the other exit from this room, the window. It's not locked, so I push it open. The night is cool and damp. Rain patters on the leaves of a tree growing near the house. The branches stretch out toward the window, and if I could squeeze past the bars, I know I could leap onto a thicker branch and climb down safely.

Except, the bars won't ever allow my head to slide through. I grip them with both hands and shake hard, but they're not even loose. They're firmly attached, and I don't think I could bust one loose even with a hammer and chisel. It makes a growl of aggravation erupt out of my chest, and I see flashlights flicker on the ground below in the direction of the street out front. Even if I got through the window, I'd have to outrun or fight his men.

There is no way out from the inside, which means I need an external force to come get me. I rethink my entire idea of the police. If Santoro thinks I'm going to hack for him and steal for him, he's wrong. I'm not stupid, and I'm not one of those dumb bitches who just melts in the presence of a powerful, good-looking man. Yes, he's ridiculously attractive, and if he took his shirt off, he'd probably be panty-dropping hot, but he's a sick bastard who's manipulated my family and people I love for years.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, hoping to get my dad on the line. Maybe he will go ahead and call the police for me. Sure, I risk going to jail for my hacking, but if I can turn state's evidence on Santoro, testify against him, they'll let me off easy. If Dad has moved the cash to a safer location, then we'll have the money and I'll be free, and Luke Santoro will be locked up.

My phone, however, shows zero bars. And I don't mean I have a poor signal. I mean

three little dots bounce and dance across the signal indicator showing that the device is looking to connect. It doesn't even show the SOS feature for emergency calls, which means Luke is using a signal jammer.

“Fuck’s sake!” With a frustrated grunt, I fling my phone across the room. It bounces off the bed and skids onto the hardwood floor, but I couldn't care less if it shatters into pieces. After all, it's practically useless to me now. I couldn't use it to call for help even if I wanted to. But that's okay. With the pile of cash I swiped from him, I could buy ten new phones once I'm out of this hellhole. If I manage to escape, that is.

The thought sends a shiver down my spine as I take in the dreary surroundings of my prison cell. The faded walls and bars on the windows make me feel like a caged animal, trapped with no way out. But I refuse to give up hope. Not when I have so much riding on my freedom.

I shut the window and throw myself on the bed, fighting back tears. I lie here for a moment and wallow in self-pity again. If I had listened to Dad’s firm warning the first time he found out I hacked the crime boss, I’d be safe now. I know the only reason they found me was how long it took for that hack. My internet dropped a few packets and it delayed my keystroke entry. There is nothing to be done about that.

Now I’m stuck in this damned room, rotting away until I agree to join his organization and steal for him, which I refuse to do. I’m not a criminal. I’m just a computer programmer. I create websites. I don’t hack. Not for him, anyway.

When I’ve had enough of feeling sorry for myself, I head for the bathroom and decide a hot shower will feel nice. I lock the bathroom door, just in case he decides to return to talk more, and strip out of my clothing. Each item gets folded neatly and laid on the bathroom counter as the water heats up. The relaxation hits me the instant I step under the stream of hot water.

Luke Santoro isn't at all who I thought he was. He's just as ruthless and controlling as I believed, but he's young, too. Which probably only makes him feel the need to be even more unforgiving and punitive than his father. A man in his thirties has seen some shit but doesn't necessarily have the experience to do all the things a man my father's age would. He probably feels the pressure to make an example out of me so his men will fear him. I won't give him the satisfaction.

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Without even a bar of soap to wash up, all I can do is rinse off, and as I do, my mind has nowhere to turn. All I can think about is my captor, his motives, how strong his single arm was holding me down onto his lap. Oh, I felt that stiffy he had. He probably thought it was funny, making me squirm against him while he was hard. Maybe he imagined I was turned on by it too. And maybe I was, a little.

If I passed by him on the street, I'd flirt, maybe bat my eyelashes at him. Luke Santoro is the type of man who turns ladies' heads when he walks into a room—large barrel chest, squared shoulders, and fuck, does he know how to dress well too. But I know who he is and what he does. I can't let my physical attraction to him persuade me to forget how awful he is. He's a horrible, evil man.

Men like him don't deserve to breathe the same air as me, or my father, or Will, for that matter. Santoro is a murderer and a thief. He kills without mercy and thinks himself to be God. I refuse to let my body feel aroused by him in any way. I scrub the arousal away with my hands and hate myself for letting him get me worked up.

Done in the shower, I snatch a towel off the rod next to the shower and dry off. I slip my panties back on and don my T-shirt, then wrap my hair up in the towel and crawl into bed. The light is still on, but I feel safer this way. Things that go bump in the night are scarier when it's dark out.

I'm exhausted from being emotional, and I pull the covers over my body. Dad has to be worried sick, and God only knows where Will is. When I watched him race away, I breathed a prayer for his safety but never thought of my own. Will is too pure for this world. I'm glad they didn't take him too.

My eyes barely shut before I'm dozing, dreaming up terrifying scenarios about what he'll do to me if I don't listen to him. I have a sex dream too, a really naughty one about how Luke dominates me into submission and spansks me until I come. When I wake up in the wee hours of the morning, it's after a horrible nightmare that I've refused to comply with him and I'm standing over my father's grave. It's then that I realize I have to do what he wants, just like Dad said. If not, he really will kill Dad and Nathan.

First light comes streaming through the window. Every trace of precipitation is gone now, not a cloud in sight, and before I'm even fully awake, the door swings open. Luke enters carrying a tray of food. He sets it on the nightstand and straightens, backing away a few steps.

He's calm, with a pleasant expression, though not a smile. He's handsome like this, and I vaguely remember a dream I had where I slept with him. I think my desires played out while I was sleeping, dampening my panties. But other things played out in my sleep too, things I can't shake.

My middle-of-the-night revelation is enough to convince me to do the right thing by my father, though it devastates me to say it out loud. So, I don't offer any thoughts as I pluck a strip of bacon off the plate and eye the stack of pancakes, the pile of scrambled eggs, and the cup of orange juice. My stomach growls loudly, giving him satisfaction that I hate to give him.

"I didn't know what sort of breakfast you like, so I had my cook make a little of everything." Luke clasps his hands together and stands back. He's wearing jeans and a polo, much more casual than his suit-and-tie look. He's hotter than yesterday, maybe because his hair is devilishly mussed, standing on end, and his five o'clock shadow lingers unshaven on his face. Why am I so damn attracted to him?

"Mmm," I grunt, chewing my bacon. At this point, it wouldn't have mattered what he

brought. I'm starving, and I need to keep my strength up to be brave and think clearly. If there's a chance of getting out of here, I can't be weak with physical exhaustion.

"Have you given any more thought to my request?" I can see the outline of his chiseled pecs beneath his shirt, and I swallow hard and pry my eyes away from him. Why am I turned on by his being around me when I hate him? I've seen other good-looking guys before and they've never done this to me. Never made my groin burn the way he does.

"I have," I tell him after carefully eating another bite of food. The pancakes look so tempting, making my mouth water. My stomach growls again, and I sit up all the way, making sure the blanket stays across my near-naked lower half. "I have a condition."

Luke looks around, taking in the sight of the splintered chair. He doesn't seem surprised or upset by it. Amused is more the expression on his face. "I'm listening," he says as he looks back up at me.

"My father... he no longer works for you at all. No money laundering, no drug smuggling. And he gets to keep the money I siphoned." I take another slice of bacon and watch Luke's face tighten. He doesn't like that I'm giving conditions or ultimatums. I don't care. He should know I play hardball, given the fact that I'm here because I stole three-quarters of a million dollars from him. He shouldn't expect me to take his orders lying down. I'm not one of his men, and I'm not afraid of him.

"You drive a hard bargain, Ms. DeSantis."

"My name is Micah, idiot." I shove the entire slice of bacon into my mouth and chew it. It's cooked to perfection, and I lick the grease from my fingers as he stares down at me thoughtfully. He may have power over me, but he can't control me. This is my

choice, my decision to do what he has suggested. I could just as easily say no, but I'm not a fool. I understand the law of choices and consequences.

"Well, I'll meet that condition, but I have one of my own." His evil smirk should have given it away, but I'm still shocked when he says, "You'll marry me, live in this house, bear my heir, and we'll call it even."

The food nearly chokes me as I suck in a breath in surprise. I cough and cover my mouth, gasping for air as he stands there watching me practically die. And all I can think is how I'm being forced into something even scarier than hacking and prison. Marry him? I'm twenty-five years old. I just got out of college with my degree, and I have a life to live. And I want to fall in love and have a family, not be forced to sleep with him, because that's what an heir means. It means I have to fuck that man, put his seed inside my body and conceive with him. And fuck, is he hot, but I can't do that. I'm not the "arranged marriage" type.

"I... I can't," I mutter and finally catch my breath. The bacon scrapes down my throat, and I chase it with orange juice. I can't just marry him and let him use my body as his baby incubator, no matter how attractive he is or how much he turns me on. What would my mother think? What would Will think?

"Ah, Dad will be disappointed that the first time he gets to meet me will be as he takes his last breath." Luke turns as if to leave, and I snap.

"Wait!" My hand shakes. Tears well up, and I whimper out, "Fine... I'll do it." He's so confident and self-assured, and it's all backed by violence and threats. He'll really just slit my father's throat if I don't marry him? What sort of vicious monster am I dealing with?

"Good. I'll order the dress."

And then he's gone, and I'm left alone feeling like my world is over. I have to find a way to get out of this before he makes me marry him. I have to, or every reason I have for living is gone, and if I die, something tells me Dad dies too. I can't let that happen, but I just can't marry that man.

Nathan will be ashamed of me, and Will might never speak to me again. What have I gotten myself into?

6

LUKE

The house is full of activity right now, people arriving and furniture being moved around. I'm setting up more space in my home office for Micah to work her magic on the brand-new system I've purchased, which is also being set up. She'll have four screens and access to the fastest supercomputer on the market today. I spared no expense. She is, after all, my new secret weapon, and our agreement begins today.

"Sir, we're ready for her," Tony says, interrupting my thoughts as I stand peering into the office where men are hard at work installing the new hardware.

"I'll bring her down, then." I nod at him and glance up the hallway at the front door where Mr. DeSantis and his son, whose name I currently forget, walk into my home. They are escorted into my great room as I turn to head up the steps.

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The staff delivered the dress I purchased for this occasion to Micah's room this morning along with breakfast. I've kept her securely stored away in her room for the past three days as preparations were made for our nuptials. She hasn't said a peep since she agreed to my proposal, if you could call it that, and today is the day we sign the papers.

I don't expect her to be thrilled by what's happening or how quickly I move, but if we're going to get a jump on this and make it look like the same criminal who stole from me is stealing from my adversaries, we have to move quickly. I'm a man of action and I don't second-guess myself often. This time is no different as I ascend the staircase and approach her room. I'm confident that my plan will work, and by the end of the week, I'll be richer and my enemies will be poorer.

Standing outside her door, I pause for a moment and listen. There isn't a sound coming from inside. Maybe she's sleeping or maybe she's just quiet today. My bet is that she's despondent, hoping her father will somehow rescue her. She knows the police will do nothing. She's in too deep with me, and I have friends in high places. This is her out, and she has to take it. That has to hurt like a bitch.

"Micah," I call, tapping on the door before I take my key out and unlock it. I hear rustling as I push the door open, and when she comes into view, it almost takes my breath away. The simple white dress hugs her curves perfectly, and her dark hair snakes over her shoulders and curves around her chest, framing her in. I provided toiletries, but she's chosen no makeup. That's alright. She's quite stunning as she is.

Her hands fidget with the sleeves of the gown which flow freely around her arms and hang far past her fingertips. The neckline dips into a sharp V between her breasts,

giving a hint of cleavage on either side of the divide which I find enticing, but I don't let my eyes linger there long. There will be time enough to enjoy that view once she's deposited a large sum into my account to replace what she's taken.

"My father? You're letting him go?" Her eyebrows peak in the middle, her concern etched on her brow. She really will do anything for her family, including forfeit her entire future just to save an aging old man who has little value left in society. I admire that in a way, because I'd have done something similar for my father, though his life had a huge importance and his absence is still being felt.

"He's downstairs. I'll inform him when the ceremony is over." I smooth my hands across the lapels of my black tux. I'm not one to care about such trivial things like ceremonies and sentimental sacraments like marriage, but we need a decent picture for the newspaper to announce our union. Putting my face out there to inform my enemies and allies alike that I am now married is important. There is nothing scarier to the world than a man who is expanding his power and influence, even if it is only in seemingly personal ways.

"Did we really have to do all this?" Micah asks, gesturing at the clothing. "It's just a business arrangement, right?" Her lip quivers as she speaks, and I see a crack in the façade she puts on around me. She wants to be the badass tough girl, but she's just as fragile as any other woman. That's alright because she's smarter than all of them put together.

I say nothing, but I extend my arm to her, and like a blushing bride, she hooks her hand around my bicep. Her steps are hesitant, unsteady and dragging, but we make our way down the staircase in the old Victorian to the lower level. The rush of movement that I left only moments ago is settled now, probably Tony's doing since they are waiting for us in the great room.

"And you give me your word, as a man of your honor, that you will let my father off

the hook. He doesn't have to launder money for you anymore, no more pushing drugs, and he can keep the money?"

She's cute when she wants reassurance. I'll enjoy making her beg for more than that later tonight. I pat her hand, which trembles around my arm, and smile at her. "I am a man of my word, Micah. I have given that word to you, and I intend to keep it. You're far more valuable to me than half the shop owners on that street."

Our footsteps bounce around the hallway, announcing our approach as she says, "So, what about the others? Will you let them go too?"

I pause for a moment outside the door and look down at her. "Don't push your luck. Now, shall we?" Gesturing into the open door, I put my hand on the small of her back and nudge her forward.

Her father gasps when he sees her, and his shaking hands cover his mouth. Micah's younger brother looks just like her, angry scowl and all, though today, her scowl is gone, replaced with anxious concern. Her body tenses. I see the muscles in her shoulder draw together and then her head droops. She wants to run to them, to be free and escape me, but she knows if she does that, I will keep my other word. The threat I made against her family.

"Please rise," the priest says from his position near the picture window that runs the length of the front of the house. He wears traditional garb, the robe and headpiece, and the room obeys him. Though I see the hatred in the eyes of those here for Micah. They know I'm forcing her to do this and they want me dead. Their eyes say everything their mouths never will.

We walk across the room and stand in front of the priest with the collective of witnesses behind us—a mixture of my close friends, family, and a few important businessmen I have meetings with later this afternoon. It isn't important to me who

witnesses this, though it makes my mother happy to know I will produce a grandchild for her sooner rather than later. She needs that happiness in her life and will probably tell me the child has my father's reincarnated spirit.

"As Mr. Santoro has requested, let's keep this short and sweet." The priest clasps his hands and nods at me. "The benediction, sir," he says and bows his head. I look at Micah who is now stoic, staring into space as if her God himself has deserted her. The priest prays, and I hear sniffing behind me—my mother, and another person. When the priest is finished, he looks back up at me.

"Shall we exchange vows the traditional way?" he asks, eyebrows raised high enough that they brush the white border on the headpiece he wears.

"I have my own," Micah interrupts, surprising me. She's a feisty one even at our wedding, which she knows isn't an option. I smirk at her as we turn to face each other—following the priest's hasty gestures.

"You may offer your vows to one another now." His stupid grin is one meant for traditional weddings, where the two who face each other in love are thrilled to be wed. This is nothing if not a shotgun wedding, though I own no shotguns. I find them useless. My Beretta is tucked inside my waistband, though, and it does the same thing.

Micah speaks again, but her words are so soft spoken, only I, the priest, and the first row can even hear them. "I give you myword, if you so much as look at my father again, I will bankrupt you, take every cent you own and give it to the poor, and then expose every criminal organization you own publicly, all while you sleep. And then I'll chop your balls off and hang them from the flagpole out front." Her eyes are narrow, flaming with rage and defiance.

I chuckle at her masterful language and glance out at our audience. Micah's father is

wringing his hands, her brother antsy and shaking his head. My mother looks shocked, but that's to be expected, and she will get over it.

Slowly, I turn back to face her with an eyebrow raised. "And I give you my word, *mi amore*, that if I catch a single keystroke of your work that isn't friendly, I'll gut your father first, bring you his heart in a box, and then slaughter you so you can be with him."

Her body grows rigid as I lean forward and whisper in her ear, "And no one will ever know it was me."

From the corner of my eye, I see the tense and anxious expression on the priest's face. I look at him and nod, and he fumbles with the rings I had Vic purchase for me, dropping one. He stoops to pick it up under my scowl as he mumbles, "If anyone knows a reason these two should not be wed, speak now or?—"

"No! I object! This can't happen," Mr. DeSantis cries out, standing up. He plucks his handkerchief from his pocket and rushes toward me, though I'm not intimidated by him. He blows his nose and continues. "Such vicious vows, *mia cara*. How can you do this?" His quivering hands grip Micah's and he lavishes kisses on her.

"It's the only way, Dad. Please sit down," she hisses, fear laced in her tone.

"But your future..."

"Dad—"

"Mr. DeSantis, it's in your best interests to listen to your daughter." Tony appears out of nowhere, escorting Micah's father back to his seat as we turn back to face the priest. In less than five minutes, we've exchanged rings, signed the certificate, and exchanged a chaste kiss, after which our onlookers applaud. All except Micah's

family, who openly weep.

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Our deal is secure, written in the fine print on our marriage license, and my future is set. Micah is stiff at my side with my arm around her, and one by one, our guests approach to congratulate us before being ushered to the back patio where light refreshments are being served. When her father approaches, I give him his good news. His life and my stolen money in exchange for his daughter, and he's home free.

He begs for her life, for her freedom, but the deal is done, and Micah has resigned herself to that fact. She is mine now, even as the ankle monitor is being placed on her leg.

"What's this for?" she asks harshly, and I smirk at her.

"I'm not an animal, my dear. You'll have free rein of the house now. Just stay on the property or that will go off. Oh, and don't think of taking it off. It will sound an alarm. I have to keep tabs on my assets." I look at Dale, my new computer guy, and nod at him. "Show her the room. I have guests to entertain, and we'll get pictures shortly."

"So, you put a house arrest anklet on me?" She crosses her arms over her chest, making her tits pop out, and I lick my lips, imagining how they will taste when I ravage her later tonight. Which reminds me of something else I want to tell her.

"Think of it as a wedding gift, dear. Don't worry, we can take it off when we fuck tonight. Oh, by the way, you're moving. You'll be sleeping in my bed from now on."

Her face droops, and I smirk at her as I walk past, knowing Dale will do his job showing her around while I go accept more congratulations and enjoy a drink or two.

Being married is as great as they say it is. I could get used to this.

7

MICAH

The ogre they call Dale escorts me to a massive room full of computer screens and towers. He has to be piggybacking multiple servers to get this much computing power in here. There are two work stations side by side, as if he expects me to work right next to him, and when he pulls the chair out, I scowl at him.

“You’re just supposed to show me the room. I’m not a child. I know what these things do.” I think about it for a second and add, “Or did you forget that I’m the one who stole money right from under your nose?”

“Mr. Santoro would like me to work with you while you do your hacking for him. I’d like to see you in action, if you don’t mind.” The man is polite—I’ll give him that—but he’s working for Luke, and that means this polite act will go away the instant I refuse to listen to him.

Since I don’t feel like getting off on the wrong foot instantly, I bunch up the skirt of this damn ugly dress he put me in and plop my ass into the chair. It’s the most uncomfortable chair I’ve ever sat in, and I say, “If I’m going to work, I need a better chair, something ergonomic. My wrists are precious moneymakers. If I get carpal tunnel?—”

“Noted,” he barks, shoving my chair in. “Now show me what you do.”

I heave out a sigh and glance around the room. The heavy black metal tables set up for this hacking are so movie-stereotypical. These people are idiots. I don’t need a high-tech computer lab to do this, just my laptop and a good connection. The rest of

the room looks like it came straight out of a GQ office spread with leather furniture and an old man smoking a pipe. It clashes so much it's distracting.

"Work!" he snaps, and I jump in my seat. Married less than ten minutes, and I'm at this damn desk working my fingers to the bone already.

They fly over the keys in a familiar fashion. He's opened a portal already, connected to TOR, and set up a wormhole through a backdoor into someone's accounts. He's good. I'm better. In twenty seconds, I have tiny deposits in, testing the connection, and then larger sums out, dropping them into Luke's accounts, which are far easier to access now that I'm in his system.

It's like taking candy from an unguarded baby on Halloween. I could drain the accounts and bankrupt whoever this is, but my job is to siphon funds without leaving a trace. And I can't be as cutthroat as his stupid wedding vows were. My father's life depends on my doing my job well and correctly.

"Fascinating. You're using the?"

"Zero-day. I know. Shut up." I don't talk while I work, except to Will. My God, Will. I wonder what he's thinking. I wonder if Dad told him what's going on. "And do you have to breathe down my neck?"

The man backs off while my fingers continue to work, punching through another firewall into another computer. This is so much faster than at home. I have to admit this computer is powerful, and Will would love working on it with me. Though I'll never tell Luke about him. I won't get him messed up in this business. Hopefully, he listens to Dad and stays the fuck out of it. He's just starting his life. He needs to be safe.

I feel hot breath on my neck again and get irritated, shrugging one shoulder to push

Dale away from me, but I feel a stubbled chin, and Dale is clean-shaven.

“I asked you not to breathe down my neck,” I grumble, but it isn’t Dale who responds.

“Ah, darling, but you’re fascinating when your mind is engaged.” Luke’s voice rumbles through me, sending shockwaves into my belly.

I thought I wasn’t scared of him, but I am. The way he so easily threatens to spill blood with a smile on his lips and my hands cradled gently in his is terrifying. My hands keep typing, but I feel the hair on my body stand on end. And I feel the heat of his breath dust my cleavage and realize I’m still in this damn dress, the one that exposes my feminine side to his view.

“What do you want?” I ask, trying to force thoughts of him out of my mind. Thoughts of what he said was going to happen tonight—in his bed, alone.

“I want to watch you work, darling.” As he says the words, he pulls my hair back over my shoulder and exposes my neck. His lips press against my skin, heating it up and sending more warmth to places I don’t want to feel warmth. Why is he doing this? Why is my body reacting this way?

“Do you have to stand so close?” I snap again, stopping my work. The code continues to run. I watch each line populate, the cursor blinking at me.

“Well, I want to see how you do it and enjoy the view at the same time. But I can let you work if you prefer. I only came to get you for pictures. They’re waiting on us. Though, if you wait too long, they’ll be photographing us in my bed, and you’ll be wearing far less than you have on right now.” His lips press against the sensitive skin below my ears, and my groin throbs. Why is this happening to me? Why am I being aroused by this? I’m not in love with him. I don’t want to fuck him.

Do I?

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I suck in a breath as I see the code string itself together. “I’m in!” I mumble, and my fingers go back to work, flying over the keys. It’s the only distraction I have from the way he makes me feel. He’s a monster, and I don’t know why I’m letting him get to me like this. I don’t want to have sex with a monster, no matter how attractive he is. But his breath continues to dust my skin, and his hand traces lazy figure-eights on my bicep. And for some reason, I don’t want him to stop doing it.

8

LUKE

When the car arrives at our destination—an old Polish restaurant in neutral territory which has always been the venue for our yearly meeting—my guests climb out first. The festivities aside, today has been full on. Arrangements for our annual gentlemen’s meeting are typically handled by my mother, but in her state, I’ve taken over everything. The meal, the time and date, all of it was set up by me and my staff, and I see the line of cars that stretches several blocks indicating all of my friends and enemies alike are here.

“Remember to leave your weapons,” Franco tells the boys, and a few of them disarm themselves, stashing their guns in my back seat.

This meeting has gone on for years. For one night of the year, we put aside our differences and feuds and join together to dine and discuss the city and our organizations. Given the time of peace we’ve been enjoying, tonight should go well. Though, with Micah’s work earlier today, it will be interesting to see if there’s any reaction to it or if it has gone completely unnoticed so far.

I walk toward the door, following the wedding guests who've joined me for the meeting. They chat openly about how my father died and it being a shame. I've heard that line enough times to sicken me, but I say nothing. I'm more interested in getting this meeting over with and getting home to see what else Micah has accomplished. She seems to bury herself in her work.

After pictures, she ditched the dress, put her jeans and shirt back on, and sat back at the computer to tackle the list of tasks I had for her. It's amazing watching her work. Later, I'll see how she performs outside the office.

The venue is tucked away in the heart of the city. The wooden floors creak underfoot as we enter, the scents of garlic and sour cream wafting through the air mixed with the polka music playing softly in the background. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling, its crystals reflecting warm light on the red- and white-checkered tablecloths stretched across long tables. Vibrant murals of the Polish countryside adorn the walls, depicting farmers tilling fields and flying pigs. I'm immediately transported to a different time and place.

The old restaurant is a hidden gem in the bustling city, nestled between towering skyscrapers and modern buildings. A bartender is busy polishing glasses with a rag behind the wooden bar while an old radio plays nostalgic tunes from the '50s. As I stroll toward one of the long tables, each step echoes memories of past meetings. I recall stern faces, their eyes reflecting the weight of decisions that had consequences far beyond this quaint establishment. The murmur of discussion, negotiation, and an occasional robust laugh—all echoes from a different era.

Near the end of the room, I see familiar faces gathered around a table. They rise as I approach, a mixture of respect and apprehension in their eyes. My father's seat at the head is empty—a stark reminder of his sudden demise. As the newly appointed head, it falls on my shoulders to fill that void.

“Mr. Santoro, so good of you to organize this.” Dimitri Zaslovsky—son of the Russian Pakhan—reaches out to shake my hand, and I extend mine in return. His father and mine have been at odds over the line between our Families’ territories for years. I’m sure he just wants to put some weight on me, the new guy, with the idea that I’ll kowtow to him and back my line up a bit.

“Dimitri, it’s good to see you again this year.” I’m seven years older than him, though his father is younger than my father was before his death. The entire Russian family is younger, having fought just to stay alive here in New York with the feuds that happened in our grandparents’ days.

“I’m sure, I’m sure.” His sly yet sardonic expression is nothing new, but here in this place, we are all at rest. Territory skirmishes and disputes mean nothing in the long run. Even the scorekeeping is put on hold for one night.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a few people to catch up with.” I excuse myself without much more than a hello because if I’m around, Zaslovsky won’t talk about his little issue, which I know he has and which I don’t know if he knows about yet. His money is sitting in my account, his and his father’s.

My guests and I walk a few steps away. Vic and Tony are here to stand with me, though even their weapons are left outside. I’m certain there are yet a few guns in this building. It’s hard to break an old habit, and for men like those in this room, it’s even harder than most. If a fight broke out, we’d soon see who honors the time-tested tradition of disarmament during a gentlemen’s meeting.

“Keep your ears open, boys,” I tell Vic and Tony, who begin to mingle. Though it isn’t long before my own ears pick up some chatter.

Standing by the bar where I order a whiskey on the rocks, I hear a few men speaking. Judging by their accents, they’re Russian, though I don’t know either of them by

name or face. But I tune my ear to the conversation they're having and keep my eyes trained on my men who wander about the milling crowd. People are enjoying their drinks and hors d'oeuvres, but soon, the meal will be served and we'll be relegated to our tables. For now, I take advantage of what I can.

"It's like quarter of a million," one says to the other, and the man whistles through his teeth.

"And Mr. Zaslovsky knows this?" The second man leans in, raising his eyebrows, but he doesn't see me looking at him. I know they're talking about Micah's work now. That's exactly how much she lifted from them without leaving a trace. I'm no computer expert, but Dale told me she was clean and I believe him.

"He knows and he's not happy. Why do you think he's not here tonight? He's at home with the techs trying to determine where it went." The two men exchange furtive glances, and I turn away. It's enough to listen. I don't need to see their expressions. I know how it feels to log in to a bank account to see the money that is supposed to be there is missing.

"That money is gone. No way he's getting it back now."

"Depends on whether he's getting that kid to help him or not. You know the one..."

My ears perk up when they mention a "kid", though I'm not sure to whom they're referring. Micah isn't a kid, and she's mine, anyway. They'll never trace her or be able to take her from my home even if they did trace her. I want to know more, like what they know and what they're doing about it, but Tony gestures to me, and I see him standing with yet another Russian I know. His name is Gar Brackovich. I'm sure that's not his real name, but it's what he goes by.

I leave my perch by the bar and join my men, who have captured the attention of a

few more Russians. They all look eager to speak with me, and I think I know why. Before I even get to where they're standing, I hear more talk about money. Tony has a stern expression, and Vic joins us as I arrive.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" I gesture with my hands as I join the group, offering an open posture, inviting them to question me. I'm an open book to them, with some redacted portions, obviously. They can ask, but that doesn't mean I'll answer honestly.

"We heard you've had some... money issues." Gar sips his glass of liquor and looks down his aquiline nose at me. He very much resembles the stereotypical Russian mobster, so I find it comical and have to stifle my chuckles.

"Interesting... Where did you hear that?" I ask them, eyeing my men, who know better than to divulge information. I may have a leak, or perhaps they offered tidbits to cast a net and see what might swim into it. Tony narrows his eyes at me and looks down, an indication that he's the culprit. I'll deal with that later. For now, the information I crave is here, waiting to be divulged.

"Hmm, the walls have ears, Mr. Santoro. I'm interested to know if you're suffering the same thing we are. Or if we have a common enemy." He sips his drink again, slyly, and snuffles. His eyes never leave mine, and I never look away. You can never be too careful when dealing with a snake. Always keep your eyes on them because they strike when you blink.

"Well, perhaps if you share your woes, I can tell you if I've suffered similar effects." I'm not easily persuaded to give up information, and he isn't going to coax it out of me.

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The room is loud too, almost to the point of forcing us to shout at each other just to be heard, but he steps closer, glancing around as he leans in to speak more directly to me. He shelters his mouth, hiding so no one can read his lips, and then whispers to me.

“We’ve had some money taken from our accounts. It appears to be some online transactions. Have you seen this?”

So, Micah’s handiwork has been noticed so quickly. This confirms to me that my father’s finance guy was a complete coglione. If the Russians can detect her very first attempt, she either needs to up her game, or I need to have Dale and Jacob go back through my accounts to see what else the little wench took from me.

“I’ve seen this, yes. We’ve had our own little run-in with a hacker.” That’s all the information I’m going to give him, though he leans in for more.

“He’s taken quite a bit. Have you found out who it is?” Gar smells like cigarettes and sex, and I don’t have the heart to tell him he needs a bath. I back away and shake my head.

“If you find our common enemy, bring him to me. We’ll have a nice chat. Now, excuse me, fellas, I’m going to eat.” I tip my glass to him and his comrades and follow Vic and Tony to our table, confident that our little hacking genius has ruffled the correct feathers.

I’d like to tell her to empty the accounts of every one of my enemies, but I need a few more offshore accounts created to hold that much money without flagging the

government and getting me into some major tax liabilities. For now, I'll be patient and wait it out, see how she fares with the small amounts. Watch what kind of stir it makes.

The meeting goes as planned. We chat among ourselves, and when the Albanians get up and rush out, all staring at their phones, I realize Micah has been successful at hacking them too. The comedian is good, though his jokes walk the line between being funny and starting a fistfight between Families, and by the time I get home, I'm ready to see Micah spread on my bed in celebration of her fantastic work.

At home, I pass by the office, heading straight to my den, and send Tony to fetch Micah. I settle in, pouring two glasses of whiskey and taking off my jacket. The information I gathered tonight is encouraging. For now, they don't know who she is or where their money has gone, only that it's gone. It took Dale a short time to track her down and bring her in, but it may take them less time. It's time we don't want to waste, and I need to speak with her about her strategy. If she left breadcrumbs, they'd know already and they'd be onto me. But seeing their reaction, I don't think she's that dumb.

9

MICAH

I've barely backed out of the latest line of code and taken my fingers from the keyboard when one of Luke's meathead guards comes waltzing in. His shoes squeak on the wooden floor, annoying me, and I look up at him with a scowl. If Luke thinks I'm going to take orders from some schmucks who work out all day, he has another thing coming. I'm his wife, and as such, I will demand the same respect as him, especially if he expects me to act like a wife in any way.

"Mr. Santoro would like to see you, please." He folds his hands together in front of

himself, arms dangling, biceps bulging, and looks down at me.

I take my good time finishing up a few last keystrokes then power down the computer. Yawning, I stand and take my good time collecting my things. My phone is here, plugged in to the computer to charge up since my charger was in my laptop bag and I have no clue where that got to. I'd call someone, but Will isn't answering and I don't want to bother Dad or Nathan with more worrying. No one else even flies on my radar anymore, so who would I call? I basically used it all day as a paperweight. I'm not sure why I even charged it.

"What does he want? I'm tired. I think I want to go to bed." I pass by him, shuffling barefoot out into the hallway. I look both ways, but the lights in the living room and great room are off. At the far end of the home, there's a light streaming from an open door.

"Come with me," he grunts, and I am forced to follow him down the hall.

Luke's words linger in my mind, the haunting tone he spoke them in too. He expects this marriage to come with all the benefits of a real marriage, including my sharing his bed, which I know means my body gets used like a blow-up doll. I'm no stranger to sex. Believe me, I've had my share. But the idea of doing that with him never crossed my mind when I agreed to this stupid plan of his. I just knew my father needed my help and this was my only option.

Now I march up the hallway to my impending doom, and I know it.

Earlier today, when he hovered over me, I had to fight the feelings of being aroused by him and his nearness. He's an incredibly attractive man, and with all that power and money, women probably throw themselves at him. In fact, he's probably had five different partners a week for years of his life. He can probably get any woman he wants, so I'm not sure why he chose me. My hacking skills could have been

purchased by threat alone, but he wants more.

“In here,” Lars says, gesturing. That’s not his name, I know that much, but since no one has introduced themselves, I’m left to make up my own names for them in my mind and pretend.

I step into the room to see Luke seated on one of the large sofas in the corner of the room. His suit coat is draped over a chair, tie loosened, shirt unbuttoned a few buttons. Two drinks sit on the glass-top table in front of him, and his arms stretch along the back of the sofa. He has one leg crossed over the other and a hungry look in his eyes as I approach, though I feel more like a child sent to a principal’s office than a wife coming in to submit to her husband’s sexual advances. But I know that’s what he wants.

“Leave us alone, Tony,” Luke says with a flick of his wrist, and the large man walks away. I store that name in my memory and stand in front of the man in charge, crossing my arms over my stomach.

“Well, you must be proud of yourself. The Russians and the Albanians in one day. Well done.” He leans forward and picks up his glass of whiskey and tips it at me. My fingers itch to get the other one and down it. I don’t want to be conscious when my body betrays my integrity and gets all worked up by his advances. “Except,” he says, punctuating the word with proper enunciation, “you were found out.”

My eyebrows rise, and I try to hide my shock. I wasn’t found out. It was a clean in and out. No one tracked me. I didn’t leave anything open. No trace of what I’ve done or any indicator that I’d be back, though I left a Trojan in there to help me open the line again next time—on both accounts. Why do needless work?

“What?” I ask, shaking my head. “I’m clean. I didn’t leave any trace.”

“Well, they knew what happened and they questioned me because they heard it happened to me too. Now sit,” he barks, slapping the cushion beside him.

Before I slowly lower myself to his level, I take the glass and down the contents then set it back down. He doesn’t even complain that it wasn’t offered or given to me. He just smirks at me and chuckles. I’m pissed off, to say the least. Maybe they noticed the activity because Will wasn’t here to help me or warn me. I rack my brain, but nothing I’ve done would send any red flags unless they just happened to check their bank accounts. Maybe I moved too much too quickly.

“Can they track you?” he asks, angling his body to face mine, and my face warms.

When I’m alone with him, my body feels things. I haven’t been this sensitive to a guy since high school when Ben Richards had a crush on me. I didn’t just give him my virginity. I begged him to take it. Fuck, was he hot, and so is Luke, but Ben wasn’t a villain. Luke is literally the Don of the Italian Family in New York City. I can’t fall for him.

“No, I swear. I would never jeopardize my father’s life.” I feel my stomach knotting and want to run away in shame.

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“I don’t care about your father’s life. I care about my business coming under fire from my enemies. Now, can they trace you? Will they know where you were when you hacked them, and can they follow your work back to my computers or your name, or code, or whatever?”

He’s angry for no reason. My work is solid. I need to stop letting fear of his response affect my reaction. I straighten and square my shoulders and say, “No. I’m certain my work is solid. That’s what you hired—uh... that’s why I’m here.”

Stumbling over my words is the least of my concern. The look in his eye, like a hungry predator hunting me down, unnerves me. And when he leans closer, I shudder, and goosebumps rise on my arms. “You mean, that’s why I married you?” He sets his glass on the table next to the empty one and pushes a strand of my black hair out of my face with a single pinky.

My tongue flicks over my lips as my body tenses. I’m feeling the warming of the alcohol, but I’m also sensing my body responding to him. I like a good romp now and then, and though I’ve had a few partners since college, I wouldn’t consider any of them someone I’d be serious with. But I’m married to this man, and he clearly wants me.

“I’m tired. I’d like to lie down,” I say, bolting off the couch. I walk toward the door, and he growls out his displeasure.

“You’re only making it more difficult on yourself, Micah. I see the way you look at me. And I see the way your lips flush deep red when I touch you. You’re aroused by me.” The leather creaks, and I know he’s standing up. His footsteps echo ominously

in the large, open room, chasing my pounding heartbeat. I pause, my hand hovering over the doorknob, breath hitching as his voice washes over me.

"You can deny it all you want, Micah," he continues, "but I know the truth. Your body doesn't lie."

The low timbre of his voice sends a shiver up my spine, and despite my best intentions, my body betrays me. I can't deny the electric thrum that pulses under my skin at his words. I can resist him all I want, denying the carnal call of his presence, but there's no denying the instinct.

"You think you know me so well, Luke?" I challenge, turning to face him. His form looms large in the dimly lit room, a dark silhouette against the minimal city lights filtering in through the window. His stance is casual, but his intent is anything but.

"I know enough," he responds, his voice laced with a quiet confidence that chips at my resolve. He steps forward, and I swallow hard as the distance between us diminishes. With each footfall, my heart rate spikes. He picks up on it, a slow smirk tugging at his lips. "I know what you want. What you desire."

I hold his gaze, my breath hitching as he inches closer. "And what might that be?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper. The defiance in it surprises even me. But there's an element of curiosity too.

His smirk broadens, and he leans in, his lips just a breath away from mine. He takes my chin in his hand, tilting my head up so I have no choice but to stare into his dark eyes. "You want me to take control." His words are a soft purr that sends jolts of anticipation through my body. "You want me to dominate you."

Instinctively, I step back, but the wall prevents any further retreat. Luke's hand releases my chin, dropping to my waist and pulling me against the hard expanse of

his body. His lips barely brush against mine as he speaks again. “You want me to bend you over my knee, Micah.”

The imagined image hits me like a punch to the gut. It’s so vivid, I see it in spite of myself. My face heats up at the thought, but my lips part slightly, an unvoiced affirmation of his words.

Luke chuckles low in his throat and steps back, releasing me from his grasp. He runs a hand through his short, dark hair before reaching for me again, but in that instant, my mind kicks in. I open the door and bolt through it, heading toward the stairs. I need to put space between us now or I will regret what my body wants to do, which my mind says I should hate.

I don't look back. I'm too afraid of what I'll see in his eyes, of what that look might do to me. I ascend the stairs two at a time, an irrational fear propelling me forward. As if Luke would chase after me, haul me back into his arms, and do exactly what he has promised.

As I burst into the sanctuary of my room, I slam the door shut behind me and lean against it. The cool wood seeps through my shirt, grounding me. My heart beats like a trapped bird in my chest, fluttering against my ribcage.

“He's a monster,” I tell myself. “A criminal. So why does my body want him so badly?” The question hangs in the air, echoing in the silent room. I slide down the door until I’m on the floor. My arms wrap around my knees, pulling them close to my chest. I bury my face into my arms, hiding from the world and the man who has somehow managed to get under my skin.

The memory of his words still linger, playing over and over again in my mind like a haunting melody. “You want me to take control.” My body burns just at the thought, desire pooling between my thighs. This is so wrong—I should be repulsed by his

arrogance, his audacity. But the idea of surrendering control to him, to Luke, sends a tantalizing thrill down my spine that I can't ignore.

And when I hear footsteps approaching, I know he's coming for me. I should hide under the bed, or in the bathroom, but part of me doesn't want to. Unbidden images flash through my mind—the rough texture of his hands on my skin, his powerful frame pressing me into submission. I can almost feel the sting of his palm against my ass, can practically hear the echo of it in the silence of this room. I clench my fists and shake my head, trying to dispel those haunting fantasies.

“Micah,” he says, jiggling the doorknob, and I push myself off the floor.

I back away, my skin tingling with anticipation, as if it somehow knows that he's only feet away. And when the door knob turns and his face appears, my breath hitches in my chest. His eyes are dark, intense, as if he's peeling back layers of me I didn't even know existed.

His lips quirk in a small smirk. "Running away?" His voice is low and husky as he steps into the room, the door closing behind him with a soft click that echoes ominously.

"Yes," I whisper, my voice barely audible. But instead of acting victorious, Luke just moves forward, his presence filling the room.

"Run all you want, Micah," he says, his gaze never leaving mine as he moves closer. The intense desire in his eyes is impossible to ignore. Even when my back hits the wall and I have nowhere else to go. I swallow, my throat suddenly dry, taken aback by the raw male energy he exudes.

"There's nowhere left to run, Micah." He corners me against the wall, his body barely touching mine, yet I can feel the heat radiating from him. His eyes roam over my face

before settling on my lips. "But if it's a chase you want..."

His voice trails off as he leans in closer, our noses almost touching, his breath ghosting over my lips seductively. My heart lurches in my chest, pounding erratically. Against all my rational thought, I find myself tilting my head, closing the distance. His lips crash into mine, the force of it pushing me hard against the wall. It's not tender or gentle, but rough and raw, filled with an insatiable hunger that mirrors my own. My hands come up to grip his shirt, my knuckles turning white as I hold on for dear life.

He tastes like sin and danger, a potent combination that sets my nerves ablaze. I part my lips to deepen the kiss, granting him access where he immediately takes advantage. His tongue explores my mouth aggressively yet deliberately, staking its claim. Each stroke fans the flames of desire burning within me, making me forget why I was resisting in the first place.

His hands snake around my waist, pulling me flush against him. I can feel the hard planes of his body through our clothing, the undeniable evidence of his arousal pressed against my lower belly. It's a shocking reminder of what he's capable of, what he wants to do to me—what I want him to do.

"Luke," I gasp against his lips, but he silences me with another bruising kiss. His hand moves up to cup my face, his thumb gently tracing my bottom lip before dipping inside. The intimate gesture sends a jolt of electricity through me. His touch is gentle yet possessive, like he already owns me and knows every secret corner of my body.

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His other hand glides down my side, along the curve of my hip, sending shivers up my spine. He breaks from the kiss to nuzzle his face into the crook of my neck, his hot breath fanning against my skin, making it tingle in anticipation. His lips attach to my sensitive flesh, sucking and nipping, marking me as his own. I tilt my head back, giving him more access, and he growls in approval.

In less than two minutes he has me undressed, bouncing on the bed with a forceful push as he strips his clothing off. His devouring gaze never leaves my body, and I whimper in desire of his heat against me again.

"Patience," he murmurs, his voice like dark silk as he prowls over to the bed. His body is a revelation. Every inch of him is hardened and sculpted with muscle, his skin bronzed and smooth. It's a body that's meant for pleasure and power, for sin and decadence, and all of it is about to be mine.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest as he moves fluidly onto the bed, like a dangerous predator ready to claim its prey. He crawls over me, his searing gaze holding mine hostage as he positions himself between my legs. I gasp in anticipation, my back arching off the mattress as he intentionally brushes his lower body against mine. The friction sends a wave of pleasure rippling through me, causing me to clutch his broad shoulders.

His lips quirk into a smirk, full of wicked intentions. "Enjoying yourself?" he teases, his voice a deep rumble that vibrates through me. I shoot him a glare, but it's powerless against the amusement that dances in his dark eyes.

He slides his hands up my sides, fingertips caressing my skin as they journey upward

until they cup my breasts. His thumbs circle over my sensitive peaks, causing me to gasp and arch into his touch. My breath hitches in my throat as he lowers his mouth, taking one peak into his mouth while kneading the other with his hand. Each flick of his tongue sends shockwaves of pleasure coursing through me, causing me to whimper and moan beneath him.

I rake my fingers through his hair, tugging on the dark locks in rhythm with the waves of pleasure. My actions elicit a deep, rumbling growl from him that reverberates through my core, sending shivers down my spine. I watch him with half-lidded eyes, caught between the realms of dream and reality. My world spins in heated circles, the room falling away until all that remains is him and the inferno of desire he's stoked within me.

"Enough teasing," I groan, pulling him up. His eyes darken with desire as he obliges, aligning himself with me. He grinds against me, a promise of what's to come, and I can't help but buck my hips into his, craving more. A low chuckle rumbles in his chest, and he obligingly rocks against me again, sending another wave of pleasure through me.

"Impatient?" he mocks, pressing a soft kiss to my jawline. Despite the attempt at levity, I can hear the strain in his voice, a telltale sign of his own restraint.

"Shut up and kiss me," I growl, reaching up and grabbing a handful of his dark locks, yanking him down to meet my lips. He complies willingly, his mouth crashing against mine with an insatiable hunger that mirrors my own. His hands roam over my body and explore every inch of me as if he's memorizing the soft curves and planes.

His teasing may have been maddening, but when he enters me slowly, allowing me to feel every glorious inch of himself, I can't help but think that the torture was worth it. His movements are slow and deliberate at first, our bodies locked in an intimate dance. But soon enough, the slow rhythm transforms into a fervor of insatiable

hunger. His thrusts become more forceful, his grip on my hips tightening as he pulls me closer, deeper.

"Luke," I gasp, clutching at his biceps as pleasure ripples through me. He's like a drug, and I'm hopelessly addicted to the intoxicating sensation of him. His low, guttural groan vibrates against my skin, sending shivers up my spine.

His rhythm becomes erratic, each thrust sending a wave of pleasure rolling through me. I can feel the anticipation building within me like a coiled spring, ready to snap at any moment.

My head tosses back onto the pillow as I whimper his name, the syllables twisting into a plea for release. "Luke..." I moan. My fingers dig into his shoulders, leaving marks that mirror the ones he's left on me.

With a low growl, he claims my mouth again in a searing kiss that steals my breath away. His thrusts intensify, the pace harrowing and utterly delicious. Each slam of his hips brings me a step closer to the edge, teetering on a precipice of unimaginable pleasure.

"Let go, sweetheart," Luke whispers against my ear, nipping at my lobe with teeth that are somehow both gentle and predatory. His voice, raw with desire and exertion, sends a thrill down my spine that meets the warmth pooling in my belly. And when he brings his hand down on the side of my ass in a hard smack, it sends me over the edge.

I obey his command, surrendering to the dam of pleasure that bursts inside me as sensations explode like fireworks in my veins. A cry rips from my throat as waves of ecstasy crash over me, leaving me breathless and trembling beneath him. I clutch him tighter, the name "Luke" a whimpered mantra on my lips as I ride out the aftershocks.

His pace doesn't slow, his body relentless in its pursuit. His hand crashes down on me again and again, sending paralyzing jolts of pleasure into me that only intensify my orgasm. Luke groans as he follows me over the edge, his body convulsing with the force of his own climax. He buries his face in the crook of my neck, panting heavily against my skin. His hands, previously gripping me tightly, slacken in their hold and slide up to cradle my lithe body that glistens with sweat as we pant and catch our breath together.

If this is what being married to Luke Santoro will mean for the rest of my life, I'm ashamed to admit I'll enjoy it. I just wish there were no strings attached. I deserve better than this, a man who isn't a violent criminal, someone who loves me and cherishes me. I wish this feeling would pass and leave me in peace, but I'm stuck.

I pray to God he keeps his word about my family.

10

LUKE

The large wall full of monitors reveals every angle of the casino to me, and I stand watching the one pointed out to me by my head of security. Christopher called me down here from my office to have a look at something he finds concerning, and I believe he may be on to something. With my arms crossed over my chest, I study the two men seated at one of our blackjack tables. Their backs are to me, but I can see clearly that they have quite the collection of chips stacked in front of themselves.

I've been watching them for several rounds, and round after round, they pull the chips in toward themselves, beating even the dealer. We get winners all the time, but we've never had a couple of men win so much or so many times in a row. The only time this happens is when someone is counting cards, which we can't prove.

“How many decks?” I ask, not even looking at Christopher. Knowing the number of decks used at any one time can help us discern if someone even has the ability to count the cards being played. More than four decks and it’s almost impossible, unless the person is a savant.

“We’re at three, sir.” Christopher’s fingers fly over the keyboard, typing in a message to send the security team on the floor. He’s had his best men filtering in and out of the tables all evening, dressed in plain clothes, watching the gamblers to make sure things are going smoothly.

“Tell him to add another deck.” I give the order, and without hesitation, Christopher is on his radio telling the dealer at table seven through the in-ear microphone all our dealers wear to add another deck.

I step closer to the screen and home in on the action. The dealer finishes up the round they’re playing and then shuffles the cards, and as he does, he slips another deck out onto the table. The men chat back and forth, though there is no sound on this surveillance screen for me to overhear what they’re saying to each other. The picture, however, is high quality enough that if they get up and move around, I’ll be able to get a glimpse of their faces and see if I can recognize them.

When the dealer shuffles in the next set of cards, the men exchange glances and shrug. They stay put, continuing to play at table seven, and I continue to watch them. It’s fascinating to me how someone can even count cards, but it happens. I’ve seen it many times. They’ll come in, sit down, memorize the deck for a few hands, and play it safe. Sometimes, they even lose on purpose so it doesn’t look like they’re cheating, and then they cash in big time. These men follow that pattern.

They offer low bets, back out when their hands are weak, and after six or seven rounds on this shuffle, they begin calling repeatedly. I watch them rake in several thousand more dollars before I’ve seen enough. I reach down to my hip and pull my

walkie-talkie out and press the button as I hold it to my mouth.

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“Vic, meet me on the floor with Mark, please.” I turn to Christopher and add, “I’ll be back.”

He nods at me as I move swiftly to the door and then down the hallway to the elevator. By the time I’m entering the gambling floor, Mark and Vic are at my sides, flanking me. The sounds of muffled conversations and clinking glasses fills the air around us. We move with calculated steps toward table seven, our unsuspecting guests completely unaware of our approach.

Mark taps one on the shoulder knowingly when I stand behind one of our cheaters, and the man turns. His forehead is creased with deep lines, eyes set into his skull like a caveman. His full beard is dusted with crumbs and droplets of moisture from his drink. He reeks of booze and tobacco smoke, and I have to resist my urge to punch him in the throat instantly.

I’ve seen those thick, bushy brown eyebrows, and the second he says, “What?” I know he’s Russian. Probably Bratva. Now what the hell are they doing in my casino trying to cheat and get away with it?

“Hello, my name is Mr. Santoro. I run this establishment.” I offer a smile but no handshake. These lowlifes aren’t deserving of that hospitable gesture. They deserve a jail cell, or better yet, a padded coffin to spend the rest of their eternity, out of sight and out of mind.

“Yeah, nice place,” he says, turning back to the table where he taps the green felt surface to call. The smugness oozes off him. He’s confident I won’t pull my weapon on him right here, and most days, he’d be wrong. Today, I have a different plan

brewing in my head.

“I noticed you seem to be doing a very good job this evening. Winning a lot of money.” I clasp my hands in front of my waist and try to breathe calmly.

“Yeah, we’re lucky. What can we say?” the other man chimes in, not even looking at me over his shoulder. I’d like to smack the snark right out of him, but that would be assault. I have to have a good reason to throw these idiots out, and since I can’t prove anything, all I can do is give them a stern warning.

“You know it’s illegal to count cards and I can have you thrown out? I just wanted to remind you fellas so you don’t have any trouble when you go to cash out.”

Vic snorts and looks away. He’d like to knock some sense into them too. I can tell by his attitude. But my men know better than to act without my permission. They stand beside me, squirming and ready to pounce but patiently waiting for my word.

“Yeah, well we ain’t countin’ cards. So let us play our game, will ya?” The first man turns back around and calls one final time, and it’s a winning hand again. There is no doubt in my mind that they’re counting cards. It’s the only way for them to be doing so well at this table time and time again.

I won’t stand for cheaters, but since I can’t prove a thing, I’ll have to do the next best thing. With my new idea in mind, I nod at my guards who turn with me and head back toward the elevators. When we get there, I tell them, “Go watch those two idiots. Find out the account number they cash out to, and send it to me immediately.”

Vic and Mark disappear as the elevator doors open, and I step in and ride it all the way to the top. When I’m back in the security office, I stand in front of the monitors watching the men cheat their way to more big winnings and pull my phone from my pocket. Two can play at this game.

My phone rings through to Micah's, and when she answers, I say, "Be ready for a new account number. I want you to access the account, and when a large deposit comes in from the casino, I want those funds shuffled right back into my holdings—my account in the Caymans. Got it?"

"Yeah, whatever," she says begrudgingly, and I smile as I end the call and stare at the screen.

I am finding marvelous ways to use Micah's talent.

11

MICAH

The tiny deposits I've made into my father's account over the past few weeks of working for Luke have gone completely unnoticed. Dale hasn't even bothered to check up on me, though he sits a few chairs down from me at all times. He's more interested in playing Tetris than doing his job, and I've done the bulk of the work for both of us. Some computer tech he is. He's a year older than me and probably learned to code in his basement.

I sit back, allowing the algorithm to run itself for a while. There's more than just moving money to be concerned with. I have to test new lines of code and find vulnerabilities in my targets' security protocols. I spend a few hours a day doing this, but I could spend all day, every day doing it. I could end world hunger if I knew how.

But it gets boring. My real job of backend development was supposed to carry me through to a career in coding. I guess this could be considered a career, though if Santoro ever goes down, I'm going down with him. I don't like the sound of that, but I don't get a choice.

“I’m stepping out,” I tell Dale, whose eyes are locked on his colorful screen. He grunts acknowledgement, and I stand and push my rolling computer chair back. The wheels crunch over some pretzel crumbs from Dale’s lunch—what a slob—and I stand and walk out.

I’ve tested the cuff Luke put on my ankle a little. I can go anywhere in the house without it going off, but when I step onto the front porch, it beeps at me. It’s probably a warning that if I go farther, the alarm will sound. I haven’t tested that part, but mostly because I have nowhere to go, anyway. I could just cut the damn thing off and vanish, but unless I can get my dad and Nathan away safely, I won’t dare.

Today, however, I step into the kitchen and plop down on one of the stainless-steel barstools. The cook left a plate of cookies out, probably because I have a sweet tooth and basically the only thing I’ve eaten since being brought here has been dessert or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I don’t have much of an appetite, really, but the sugar helps me fight off the negative emotions. Horrible habit, I know, but what’s a girl to do?

While I munch on the confection, I pull my phone out and dial my father’s number. He doesn’t have a cell phone, too old-fashioned to invest in something like that. Though the phone company forced him to switch to a VOIP phone, which I had to set up for him since he didn’t even have internet. Can you believe he still ran an analogue cash register until a few months ago?

“Baby, oh, gosh. Are you okay? How are you doing? I miss you so much. Do you think that horrible man will let you come visit us soon?” Dad sounds worried, as usual. I’ve called him once a day since Luke turned off the signal blocker, and it’s always the same. He wants me away from the Santoro family, but there just isn’t an out until Dad can come with me. We have the funds now, just not the means. There’s no way to get away from Luke and his men.

“I’m okay, Dad. Just bored out of my mind right now.” I take another bite of the cookie and chew quietly as he continues to bombard me with questions. It’s the perfect blend of chewy and chocolaty. It’s like the person who cooked these knows exactly what I need right at this moment.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he? Tell me you’re not being harmed.”

I think of Luke and my time with him, the nights in his bed. No, I wouldn’t call that harm at all. Though it’s obvious he’s trying really hard to produce an heir. That or he’s just sex starved and unleashing it all on me. I haven’t minded the attention. At least the sex is good, and he makes sure to please me.

“No, Dad. He’s not hurting me. How’s Nathan? Have you heard from Will? He isn’t responding to my texts.” I’ve tried a few times to talk to my best friend, but after that day I got snatched, he’s been a ghost in the wind. It hurts my feelings, but he has morals. I know he hated it when we hacked Luke, though if we’d have donated the money to a children’s hospital or something, he probably wouldn’t have cared.

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Dad sighs softly and then takes a deep, throaty breath. “Your brother is worried. He’s sleepless. He keeps scheming some crazy things to find a way to bring you home.”

“I’m happy, Dad. Okay? Luke isn’t that bad. I’m sure he will loosen up soon and let me come visit.” I’m lying. I’m not happy at all, but he doesn’t need to know that. At least I’m not on the black market being shared between dozens of men. The man I have to sleep with is good at what he does, and he seems to take pride in getting me off.

“I haven’t spoken to William in a week. He is upset that you chose to marry Mr. Santoro. He said he would find a way to get to you too, but that was the last I heard from him. I’ll call his mother later this afternoon and see if she can talk some sense into him. Santoro is a scary man, mia bella. I don’t know if there is much we can do now.”

I hate that my dad has resigned himself to the fact that he can’t fight against Luke. He’s free and he shouldn’t have to worry about Luke anymore, but if someone worse than Luke comes along, Dad will cower to them too.

“How is business now that you’re not smuggling drugs and cleaning cash?” I force a smile so that my words sound more cheerful, but they are still dreary. I want to be there with him in the freedom, helping him stock shelves and do books. He’ll need Will’s help more than ever now that I’m not there to run the numbers. Nathan isn’t good with computers, so his chore is housekeeping.

“It’s wonderful, Micah. You have no idea how much better I sleep at night. Though I still worry about you so much.” Though brighter, his voice is still tinged with worry

and sadness. Still, just hearing that my sacrifice has made my father's life even marginally better is good enough for me. I'll continue with this sham of a marriage as long as I need to in order to earn Luke's trust. Then I'll plan a way to get away from him and take his money too.

"I'm so happy to hear that." Staying put with Luke is the only option I have right now to ensure my father's safety. I'm sure he realizes I've had to make the deal, even if he never heard Luke give the threat. He knows me well enough to know I do what I have to do to make things happen.

I hear footsteps and then I hear someone clear their throat. I look over my shoulder as I shove the rest of the cookie into my mouth, and Luke stands there with a grim expression. His stare is enough to make grown men tremble, but I roll my eyes at him as I chew.

"I gotta go, Dad," I say with cookie in my mouth. "Give Nate my love. I'll call you tomorrow."

"I love you, precious girl." I hear him say the words as I lower my phone and press the End Call icon on the touch screen. It's bittersweet hearing from him because I want nothing more than to be with him, helping him grow his shop. This isn't at all how I thought my life would go.

"I'd like a word with you." Luke walks farther into the kitchen and pulls up a stool next to me. He eyes the plate of cookies, so I slide it at him. I never figured him for the type of guy who eats cookies at their kitchen island so casually, but there is a lot I don't know about him.

We sit there like two normal people, staring at cookies, waiting for the other to speak. It feels almost normal, like Luke is just another person I'm friends with or interact with when in reality, he's the scariest man I've ever met. But the insane sex we've

been having every night has built somewhat of a rapport. He probably expected to have to force me, but the things he does to my body have me eating out of his hand and practically begging for it by the time it's dark and we're lying down.

"I've seen the latest numbers. Dale showed me." He plucks a cookie off the plate and shoves the entire thing into his mouth in one bite, chewing awkwardly. I watch him for a second, feeling out of place. This beast of a man is sitting next to me eating cookies as if this conversation is the most natural thing in the world for him.

Then my pulse quickens as I wonder if Dale has shown him the real numbers, the ones I've moved from Russian accounts to my father's. Or if he has seen the backdoor I left into his offshore accounts to make it easier for me to access them again when I'm out of here and running with my family. I've been a busy little bird, storing some treasures away for a rainy day, and I hope Dale hasn't noticed anything.

"Hmm," I grunt, picking up another cookie. I hope my nerves aren't showing through. I mask them by taking small bites and avoiding eye contact.

"It's good work," he says casually, and then he selects another cookie too—a perfect one with exactly ten chips showing through the top of the golden-brown surface. I'm not used to accepting compliments from men like him, only threats, so I feel tense as he takes a bite this time and smiles.

I know it's good work, and I know why the Russians figured out what I was doing so quickly. I've since reconciled my mistake and it won't happen again, but never will I tell him that I knew it was a mistake. Instead, I give him a deadpan expression and shove the whole cookie into my mouth. I could use a glass of milk to wash this down, or maybe a bottle of chocolate syrup to slurp a mouthful from.

"Dale also says you've been creating new code to outsmart the counter hackers in the future." He speaks dryly as if he knows anything about hacking. I could hack his

whole fucking house and he'd never know what happened. In fact, I could hack his security system and this ankle monitor and run away. And I would if I knew I could get to Dad and get him out before Luke's men discovered me missing.

"That's literally 101, buddy." My heart clenches as I think of Will and how he used to do that task for me, but now I'm left on my own to do all the work.

Crumbs drip to the stainless-steel countertop, and I brush them away then slide off the stool. I walk to the cupboard and snatch a glass and then go to the fridge to find only almond milk. Disgusting. "Fuck's sake. For as much money as I'm stealing for you, you'd think someone would have the decency to get me some normal vitamin D milk." I scowl into the illuminated, cold void and shake my head.

Luke chuckles and dusts his hands as he stands. "Well, let's go to dinner to celebrate. I'll get you all the milk you want, and you can order only dessert if you want." He walks over to me and extends his hand in my direction, and I scowl at him. What makes him think I want to go out to dinner? Especially with this house arrest contraption on my leg.

I look down at his hand as he slowly pushes the fridge door shut and takes the glass from my grasp. "Kinda already ate." I scowl at him for taking my glass, but I wasn't going to use it, anyway.

"You will eat more than cookies. You'll be carrying my heir before too long, and you'll need your strength." He takes my hand and brings it to his lips to kiss it, as if we are so happily married and totally in love. I cringe but let him kiss each knuckle.

Then, I pull away from him and cross my arms, tucking my hands into my armpits, and he smirks at me. His game really is to fuck me every night until I'm knocked up and can't run away. Well, too bad for him that I got my depo shot about a month before this shit went down.

“Fine, but I pick where.” I jut my chin out defiantly, and he nods, which I can’t believe. He’s letting me pick where we eat dinner?

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. Now go get dressed. Wear something nice.” He gestures at the door, and I walk around him heading up to the bedroom. It will be super simple to “pick something nice” since I only have three outfits right now and one of them is my wedding dress. He needs to take me shopping or let me order some things online because I look awful in red, and that’s the only color I’m left with to wear.

12

LUKE

The click of the ankle monitor’s lock disengaging sounds, and I slide the cuff off Micah’s ankle. She looks stunning in the dress I put in the closet for her. I’ve had a full wardrobe ordered, ready to be delivered tomorrow, but tonight, we celebrate the incredible work she’s doing for me.

She reaches down and rubs her tender skin, slightly red from the cuff rubbing on it but not injured. No one will ever notice with as stunning as she looks. They’ll be too busy admiring her curves and the way the wisps of hair frame her face in. And standing next to me, they won’t dare question her even if they do notice.

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“Ready?” I ask, drawing her hand away from her leg, and she nods at me. We slide across the back seat of the limo and out the door, and I lead her to the restaurant. It’s a ritzy little place I discovered years ago when searching for a good place to open my first business. I loved this entire block for my casino, but this little gem stole my heart and I opted for the casino’s current location in Lower Manhattan rather than upsetting one of my favorite eateries.

“This place looks expensive,” she says, sweeping her eyes up to take in the marquee. It is expensive, one of the oldest restaurants in the city. The two-story building has yet to be taken over by developers who have managed to secure the rest of the block and drive property values up. I’m sure given enough time, they will pounce on this little place and destroy it too with their gentrification.

“It is, and the food is to die for.” Micah shudders as if my comment is a threat or a warning, but I don’t honestly think anyone has died for this food, at least not here Stateside.

The bell above the door jingles as we walk in, and the maître d’ smiles brightly at me. “Right this way, Mr. Santoro.” He takes off into the dining room which is full of customers, some of them looking shocked to see me. I’m used to it.

The owners of this place and more than half the staff know me by name. Perhaps it's because I’ve been here quite frequently, or maybe it’s because I made it a point when I was searching for real estate to leave this little place alone. The owners were so grateful they offered to let me eat here free for life, but I know the value of a meal and a hard day’s work. Just being honored with the ability to enjoy this venue is enough.

We follow the man to my table, a round booth on a raised dais in the back corner, complete with a curtain to draw for privacy. I watch people staring as we pass and can't help but notice the view myself. Micah always wears her jeans and T-shirt, partly because it's the only outfit she has that belongs to her. Mostly because despite my having purchased a few things for her, she disdains them as if they don't even exist. This week will change that.

"Bring us a bottle of house wine and the special," I tell the maître d' before he walks away, and Micah and I settle into the booth and get comfortable.

She's quiet, sipping the glass of water already placed on the table in preparation for our visit. I called ahead to let them know we'd be here, and as usual, they've gone all out to make this special. There is a vase of roses, mints on our plate for after dinner, and the silverware is polished to a high sheen.

"You're doing fantastic work." I'm not afraid to offer compliments when they're due, and she doesn't seem shy about accepting them. That may or may not be a weakness on her part. It's left to be determined. Overconfidence can be a detriment at times if one isn't too careful.

"I know..." She sets the water down and stares across the table at my face. We know absolutely nothing about each other save the obvious, so I'm sure she has questions to ask. And we've had a lot of sex, taken a few meals together after a long day, and chatted in passing about work. But we haven't really talked about deeper things. I search her expression, wondering what she's thinking, and she sighs softly.

"What are you thinking?" The waiter returns as she pensively sips her water. He sets two glasses on the table and an ice bucket with a bottle of wine. He merely nods, not wanting to interrupt our conversation, and when he passes, she finally speaks.

"What sort of businesses are you running? I mean, outside of the drug smuggling and

the casino?” Her fingers linger on the stemware set before her, hugging it loosely as condensation begins to form on the outside. I take the wine from the bucket and uncork it, then fill her wine glass and mine as I answer.

“Well, we hold interest in a financial firm, trading stocks and such. We also own a chain of restaurants in the greater New York area. But the casino is the main source of income. Why do you ask?” The glasses full, I set the wine bottle back into the ice bucket and put the cork in it. Micah suddenly looks dissatisfied, as if my answer doesn’t please her or if she was expecting me to say something else. She takes a deep breath and lets out a sigh, then picks up her wine and has a drink.

The dining room offers little privacy to have a truly intimate discussion without the curtain pulled, but I don’t think that’s what she’s expecting. I sip my wine as I wait for her to put her thoughts together again. Until now, she’s been very forthright about her thoughts and says things without letting her brain filter them. Tonight, however, she is acting differently. Like she wants to say something but doesn’t know how.

“You’re really good at what you do,” I lead on, hoping to stir her to words, and she smiles. She’s so beautiful when she smiles, and I take a moment to truly notice that. Micah has this ethereal beauty to her, like she’s stepped out of a portrait painted by the brushstrokes of a master artist.

“I really enjoy what I’m doing. I love the feeling of my fingers across the keys. Each keystroke feels satisfying. If I were typing novels or writing blogs, it would be no different. My fingers love the rhythm and tap of the action, and it’s quite soothing.” I watch her fingers twitch as she talks. I can see that about her—the tactile need to feel the keys beneath her fingers.

“But...” I probe, feeling like there is more that she hasn’t shared yet. I set my wine glass down and wait. The waiter brings a basket draped in a white cloth which I know is full of garlicky, buttery rolls fresh from the oven. I smell the savory scent, but I

don't take my attention from her. She smiles at the man, and he nods knowingly again, saying nothing, then jets off toward the kitchen.

"My dad wants me out." Her words are tart, sticking to the roof of her mouth. She washes them down with a gulp of wine and stares into the swirling burgundy liquid. "He is scared of you for good reason. I'm scared of going to prison for what I'm doing. I love doing it, but it's unethical."

"Unethical? To steal from men who rob and kill?" I chuckle, but she bristles, squaring her shoulders. I sigh. A woman with a conscience is a good thing. I have to remind myself of that because she will raise my son. And while this line of work isn't so conducive to a moral compass, without at least the sensitivity for human life, we'll be raising a serial killer, not a criminal mastermind.

Her eyes remain trained on her wine glass, but she rolls her lips together, probably forbidding her mouth to speak a retort she knows will upset me. Why is she holding back now? This fiery little minx has no problem riling me up and pissing me off. Though, I adore that she is so innocent and pure. I was that once—young, naïve, innocent... Then I grew up and realized the world is going to put rules around you every second of every day. Rules are made for the weak, the ones who can be shepherded.

I break rules because I can. Because I found a path that was better for me, one that allows me to live a life most people only dream of. The rules were broken for a man like me before I was even born. I was brought into this system before I knew it existed.

"You rob and kill and steal..." She draws her gaze up from her glass to my face. There's a sobriety there that makes me pause and question the very fabric of my existence. A conviction so deep, I want to be different—better—for her. She makes me feel that way.

“And I protect those who work with me and for me and those I care about.” I state the last fact as I look her in the eye. Yes, I care that she’s making me a very,verywealthy man, though I was wealthy before this all started. And yes, I care that she stole from me and owes me more than she’ll ever imagine. Being shown as vulnerable was a huge hit to my influence in this city.

But there’s something more about Micah I can’t put my finger on, and that’s the part that makes me truly weak. Not the information she has on my organization, not the fact that she can put a knife to my throat while I sleep and I’ll never be the wiser until I wake in pain and bleeding. But because she’s worked her way into my thoughts when my mind is unoccupied and my heart when I’m not otherwise distracted.

“I suppose that may be true.” Her eyes sink again. She doubts that I can protect her from my enemies and the authorities, but I didn’t get where I am only because my father died. If he didn’t think me capable, he’d have handed the reins over to an uncle or cousin. I know what I’m doing. My men don’t get caught because I train them, and if they do get caught, I have men on the police force to help with that.

“Let’s dance,” I tell her, sliding my hand across the table to take hers. Her fingers are cold and damp from the condensation on her glass. Her eyes widen and then darken.

She glances around the dining room nervously and scoffs. “No one is dancing.” I watch the blush creep into her cheeks and her tongue draw across her lower lip in protest.

“Come,” I order, slipping off the bench. She stands with me, her cheeks flushed a deep pink, and I pull her against my body and begin to sway to the light music playing in the overhead speakers. “You have nothing to worry about,mia cara. And if you are feeling guilty about the funds, we can help alleviate some guilt. What if I give ten percent of all the profits to some charity, something you choose?”

Assuaging guilt was my father's specialty. His Robin Hood mentality of taking from others to fuel what he deemed philanthropic pursuits of arming civilians and helping them self-medicate with recreational drugs was a cornerstone of his life. And it was the only reason my mother stuck with him. She saw the redeeming quality in his work where no one else could.

“Anything I want?” she asks, now relaxing in my embrace. The music grows louder, and I see another couple with beaming smiles rise from their table and begin dancing too. Micah's eyes sweep out over the sea of people lost in their own conversations and dinners, though her ear is tuned to my voice. She has such poise and grace, it's hard to believe I'm the lucky man who married her—even if it was something she had little choice but to accept.

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“Anything. You say it—I’ll do it.” She feels good against my body, and if offering a smidgen of my fortune will ease her conscience and keep her happy, I’ll do it. She’s beginning to grow on me, and I’m not quite ready to give that up.

“Like childhood cancer research?”

“Done,” I tell her, kissing her cheek. “And for as good as you are at what you do, you should be doing more of it. Imagine bankrupting the Russian crime syndicate and giving all their millions of dollars to hospitals to cure cancer. Micah, you could save the world.” I add some fuel to her fire. She’s a smart woman, though, and can’t be manipulated, but this isn’t a manipulation. It’s merely my attempt to encourage her to chase something she excels at while helping others at the same time.

“You really like to break the rules, don’t you?” she asks, now looking up at me. She’s not that much shorter than I am, but the way her chin tips upward leaves just enough room for me to kiss her if she lingers in this position.

“Rules are meant to be broken.” I watch her eyes dart between my lips and my eyes, and I feel something stirring in me.

“Prove it,” she whispers, and then she steps back from me, bowing at the shoulders, and smirks. Her eyelashes bat a few times, and she turns away, tapping a waiter on the shoulder as he passes. She says something, and he points to the hallway near the back where I know the bathrooms are.

My dick twitches as she walks away, that red dress hugging the curve of her ass like it was made just for her body. This little vixen has something up her sleeve, and it’s

making my blood pump, and that blood is all going one place. I start after her, prowling behind her hips as they sway.

“Keep the food warm,” I tell the waiter, seeing he’s carrying our meal, and I duck into the hallway too.

I guess dessert comes before the meal tonight.

13

MICAH

The instant he took that cuff off me in the car, my plan was simple—make a daring escape and never come back. But the compliments? And dancing? Not to mention the very generous offer of giving ten percent of his—my—work to a charity of my choosing... Luke Santoro is a charmer—and a snake. And what’s worse is, he’s turning me into one too. Stealing from the criminal underworld to profit the less fortunate in life is not my idea of actually helping anyone. It makes me a criminal just like him.

So, why am I leading him toward the bathroom for spontaneous sex in a public place? And how does he have so much power over my body?

People watch me walk past. I’m the weird woman who danced with a man in a restaurant that has no dancing. Or maybe it’s because he’s following me? I can feel his eyes on me, not too far behind, but not too close, either. I weave through tables and into the back hallway and reach for the women’s restroom door knob, only to find it locked. But before I can even react, Luke is here, wrapping a hand around my waist and ushering me deeper into the hallway to the men’s room.

“Mia cara, you’re pushing my buttons,” he growls into my ear as he forces me

through the door. I hear the lock click behind us, and then he's on me, pawing at my dress, nipping the skin on my shoulder. The stubble from his chin scrapes along my skin, teasing me, and my groin warms with anticipation.

"God, how do you do this to me?" I ask him, turning to face him as he shimmies my skirt up higher on my thighs. My hands flutter to his chest where his heart hammers against his ribcage.

Luke's eyes, dark and smoldering, meet mine as he pauses in his frenzied movements. The playful glint that usually resides in them is gone, replaced by an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. "It's a talent," he replies, a sardonic smile flashing across his face before he dives back into his task.

My shoulders hit the cold tiles of the bathroom wall as he pins me in place, his hands pressing against my hips with an unspoken command that I stay put. He sinks to his knees, and I gasp at the sudden change in position. My hands tangle in his hair and I'm overcome. His eyes never leaving mine, his fingers curl around the hem of my panties. The intimate fabric slides away, leaving a trail of goosebumps along my skin before he lifts a leg and drapes it over his shoulders.

His breath is hot against my core, sending shivers throughout my body. My fingers tighten in his hair as he presses small kisses to the insides of my thighs, the taunting touch eliciting soft gasps from my lips. The anticipation is sweet agony as I watch him with hooded eyes, his own gaze dark with desire.

Just as I think I can't stand another second of waiting, he moves closer, his tongue sliding over me with a gentleness that seems almost in contradiction with the man himself. The shockwave of pleasure that rolls through me is enough to make my knees buckle, and I find myself clutching onto him tighter, silently imploring him not to stop.

“Oh, fuck. Yes,” I moan, and my voice seems magnified by the tile walls around me. As if everyone in this restaurant can hear my moans of pleasure.

His fingers dig into my hips, holding me steady as his ministrations become more focused, more deliberate. It's like he knows exactly what will drive me over the edge—and he's using that knowledge without mercy. Licking, sucking, nipping at my skin, his mouth on my pussy stimulates a desire for him I've been pushing away all day long.

His actions become a blur. All I can focus on are the feelings, the raw sensuality of the situation. I press my back harder against the cool wall, shuddering with each sweep of his tongue. The dull hum of activity outside the bathroom door fades into nothingness as my world narrows down to this moment. To him.

Suddenly, I feel his fingers enter me. I gasp, the feeling overtaking me, and my grip tightens on his hair even more. Luke chuckles against my skin, the sound vibrating through me and this entire room. His movements increase in pace, and he attacks my sensitive nub with an intensity that pushes my pleasure higher and higher until my world spins, tilting on its axis.

The guttural moan that escapes me is swallowed by the harsh sounds of the dining room beyond the door. Grinding against his mouth, I curl my fingers in his hair, tugging him closer as every nerve ending in my body throbs with ecstasy.

“Shit,” I hiss, watching his tongue dart in and out of his mouth and dance across my most sensitive parts. He's good at this, so good I'm coming undone, begging to come on his face.

His fingers move in a rhythm, a dance as synchronized as our earlier one on the floor, but this one is infinitely more intimate. His tongue follows the rhythm, lapping at me, drawing out sensations that have me whimpering, ready to go weak at the knees. The

pleasure peaks, and I cry out as an orgasm tears through me. He doesn't let up, eating me through my climax until the pulsating pleasure becomes almost too much to bear.

“Luke...” His name rolls off my tongue in a breathless gasp, a plea for mercy that goes unheard as he continues his relentless assault, basking in my surrender.

When the waves of sensation finally begin to ebb, I slump back against the wall, spent and sated. I feel him rise to his feet, his fingers tracing one last path up my thigh before they enter his mouth. He licks them clean, and then his hands cup my face, tilting it upward as he leans in and kisses me deeply.

I can taste myself on his lips, a stark reminder of what just transpired between us. "My turn," he murmurs against my lips, his voice a husky whisper that sends another shiver down my spine, but for entirely different reasons this time. I manage to let out a weak nod, too blissed out to form actual words.

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His mouth moves from mine, trailing kisses along my jawline, down my neck and across my collarbone. I feel the shivers ignite again, a different kind of anticipation curling low in my belly as he takes his time, exploring every inch with lips and tongue and teeth. His hands are firm on my waist, holding me up when I feel like I might crumple.

The bathroom is filled with soft gasps and faint echoes of water dripping from the faucet. All else is lost in the torrent of our breaths mingling together.

Luke lifts me with ease, my legs wrapping instinctively around his waist. I feel the cold porcelain against my back as he places me on the vanity. A gasp escapes my lips as he unbuttons his pants, letting them drop to the floor along with his boxers. His body is another tantalizing sculpture in this dimly lit room, each muscle tensed, ready to claim me in ways I never imagined.

He uses one hand to guide himself to my entrance and another to keep me steady as he pushes into me slowly, inch by tantalizing inch. My nails dig into his biceps, anticipating the exquisite pleasure that's about to unfold.

Someone jiggles the handle, but we both ignore it. No one is interrupting this moment between us. Our eyes are locked, and anticipation builds inside my groin as I wait for him to really enjoy me.

He stills, allowing me a moment to adjust before he begins moving. Each stroke is slow, measured, as if he's savoring every second, every gasp and whimper that escapes my lips. The rhythm he sets is torturously slow, pushing me to the edge, only to pull back again and again. It's a delicious torment, a dance of push and pull that

has me writhing around him, hands clawing at his broad back.

"Luke..." I whimper his name again, but this time, it's not a plea for mercy. It's a plea for more. More of his touch, more of his warmth, more of this ecstasy that has captured me so completely.

He groans in response, the sound guttural and rough, reverberating through his chest and into my skin. His pace quickens, the pleasure escalating with each thrust. I moan, matching his rhythm, my hips grinding against his. His hand finds my clit, fingers working in a maddening rhythm that is pushing me toward the edge once more.

He pumps into me harder now, faster. I can feel every inch of him inside me, filling me. He hits a spot that makes stars burst behind my eyelids, and a guttural scream escapes my throat. His name. Only his. Over and over again.

"Luke, Luke..."

"Say it again," he growls, pushing deeper, harder in response to my pleas. The bathroom door rattles again, but we pay it no mind. This world—the porcelain under my hands and his body pressed against mine—are the only things that matter now.

And then he pushes me over the edge once again, his movements growing frantic as I tighten around him. My back arches, legs quivering around his waist as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me. He is relentless, his fingers still working their magic on my clit even as the climax is shaking me to my core. His hot breath fans over my face as he peppers kisses along my throat, whispering words of possession and desire that further fuel the pleasure coursing through me.

"Mine," he growls, his voice ragged with desire, "only mine."

"Yes, yes!" My voice is a broken whimper as the orgasm tears me apart, leaving me a

trembling wreck in his arms. Yet, he doesn't stop. He keeps moving inside me, riding out my climax with heavy thrusts that have me gasping for breath.

When it finally ebbs away, I find myself clinging to him, my heart pounding in my chest. My fingers trace the thick cords of muscle on his back through his shirt, now damp with sweat.

He presses me closer into him, our bodies entwined as he rides out his own climax. His breath hitches, a low groan rumbling deep within his chest as he buries himself deeper inside me, surrendering himself to the waves of pleasure that rack his body.

"God... Micah," he breathes out, the words a whisper against my skin. His hold on me tightens briefly before it slackens, his body relaxing against mine.

For a moment, we lean on each other, out of breath and panting. Luke isn't exactly who I thought he was. I never thought him capable of any benevolence or kindness, but if he follows through on his spoken word this evening, it would redeem at least some of the negative qualities I've seen in him. Still, he's the head of a major crime syndicate, and what does that make me?

"Let's eat before our food is cold," he says, kissing my cheek. He pulls out, and his sex drains from my body, dripping to the floor between his feet. He grabs a handful of paper towels and thrusts them in my direction before putting his dick back inside his pants and fixing them.

I wipe myself clean and slide off the vanity, careful not to tip it over. Then I fix my dress and bend to retrieve my panties, but he growls, "Leave them," as he grabs my wrist. I pause, staring at the lacy fabric, wondering what any man who comes in here next will think, and my cheeks warm.

"But..." I protest, but he pulls me upright and gently grips my chin then winks at me.

“Leave. Them.” He punctuates both words as if it’s a command and slides his hand lower on my arm to lace his fingers between mine.

As we walk out, I glance down at the panties once more, then turn to follow him, and in the hallway outside the bathroom, we pass a line of men waiting to use the toilet. Each of them looks me up and down like I’m a cheap whore they can purchase next. Luke draws me along, sliding his hand into the small of my back possessively, and leads me to our table under the stares of everyone in the room.

I’m not sure if I like feeling like a possession, but I love the way he makes me feel. And if someone is going to steal from criminal organizations, why not me? And if someone like Luke is going to have as much money as he has, who better to distribute part of that to a very worthy cause than me? It’s not ideal, but I can accept that.

I just don’t know how much I really accept this marriage. Sex is good, but there is more to a relationship than amazing sex. I need security and safety. Luke likes to live dangerously, and maybe it’s just too dangerous for me.

Only time will tell.

14

LUKE

Smoke rings rise toward the ceiling of my office in the casino as the interior decorator waltzes around the room with her fancy tablet open. I suck on the cigar and nod at her, indicating that Vic should watch what she’s doing as she holds her tablet up and presses the screen. The damn thing is so high-tech it has an app for measuring space and distance in real time. She moves it slowly, pointed at one corner of the room and along the entire wall until she reaches the far side, then presses the screen again.

“Impressive,” he says sarcastically, and I must agree. The new technology they have has replaced some very basic principles in design and architecture with machines that can fail and glitch. I’m not sure I like it, though I do very much enjoy the work Micah does with her form of tech.

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Changing the subject, I say, “Any word on the street about what’s going on?” Vic knows how delicate this topic is, how we have to use veiled language and keep things on the down low with the designer around. I just can’t stop doing business while she takes two hours to make her plans for revamping the space.

“Yeah, I heard our friends who own the bookstore aren’t happy about some of the changes in their finances.” Vic rolls his own cigar along the edge of the ash tray, depositing a hefty load of ashes into it. I figured as much. She went out of the gate strong, and though she still insists that there is no way they can actually trace what she’s doing now, or even then, for that matter, they were alerted the day of our gentlemen’s meeting and now they’re on her scent.

“That’s not good.” I tap my own cigar on the ashtray and drop the ashes, then bring it back to my lips and suck on it, filling my mouth with the smokey-sweet flavor.

The designer turns to look at me and grimaces. “You know whatever paint we put on that ceiling is just going to be ruined by those filthy things. Think of what they’re doing to your lungs.” Her scowl rivals my own mother’s, though they’re friends, so I’d expect nothing less. “Your father had a heart attack and died four months ago, Luciano. Don’t you worry it will happen to you?” She approaches my desk with her tablet, typing away as she does.

The woman is younger than me, probably the daughter of one of my mother’s dearest friends for years. Mom used her to renovate all the rooms in her home a few years ago and swears by her eye for fashion and functionality. I just want to remove the red and make it my own. Everything in this place is disgustingly red, perhaps to hide all the blood the carpet and upholstery saw under my father’s regime.

I exhale and puff the smoke into a ring that rises. “Celia, my father died of a heart attack, not lung cancer. And besides, you don’t inhale cigar smoke. You savor it in your mouth, tasting the flavors infused into the tobacco.”

Vic smirks at me, a nasty, sardonic expression that tells me he dislikes this woman. But I promised my mother my men and I would be nice to her. To the rest of the world, this is a legitimate business—which it is, just not the most ethical at times. And Celia doesn’t need to know what goes on behind the scenes.

“Well, it still ruins the paint.” Her eyes draw upward to the ceiling above my desk, then above the red couches that will be removed later this week. “Just look. Ugly yellow stains.”

I don’t tell her, but those ugly yellow stains are the only splash of color in this room that I like. I’ve seen enough red for my lifetime, and those stains speak volumes—like tiny fragments of my father’s life history plastered on the ceiling for everyone to stare at and wonder who he smoked with, who sat across from him, who watched as he dispatched enemies and rebels.

“I like them. Let’s not paint the ceiling at all, and then you don’t have to worry about it.” I smile with my decision and feel my phone inside my pocket vibrating before the ringtone chimes.

“Well, I...” She scoffs, but when I bring my phone to my ear, she gets the point and walks away.

Vic chuckles at me as he sucks on his cigar and pulls his own phone out to entertain himself while I take my call.

“Santoro. Speak,” I say into my phone, holding it to my ear. Making Celia get flustered like that was so entertaining, I didn’t even look at my caller ID, so I’m

pleasantly surprised to hear Micah's voice.

"Luke, man, taking these winnings back is just not a good idea." I hear her fingers clicking on the keyboard and know she's working.

I've given her a list of accounts to hack and amounts to transfer. I know every one of the sick bastards who thinks they can come into my place and count cards. If someone comes in here and legitimately wins, I cash them out with no problem. Those folks rarely take home more than a thousand dollars, and usually after they've dumped several hundred or even thousand into betting.

But these assholes come in here with their sketchy betting scheme and cash out ten or twenty grand each time they're in here. Everyone knows gambling at a casino is just entertainment. People don't win amounts like that. Sure, every once in a while, we let a big winner toot their own horn. It's good for publicity, draws other folks in. But for these guys to do it regularly for weeks now, it's just proof they're counting cards, and I won't put up with it.

"Hello, beautiful." I've made it a point to discuss things with Micah so that she knows if I'm otherwise detained or occupied, she won't be able to talk shop like normal with me. "I think the list of things I gave you to do is still what I'd like you to do." I tap my cigar on the ashtray and watch Vic's face contort as he scrolls his phone. A scowl etches his forehead, and he purses his lips.

"Luke, cut the crap. If we just transfer the exact amount they take from the casino back out to a different account, they'll know. Even if I route it through fifty other banks first, they're going to track it to you. We have to be more subtle." Her fingers click away speedily, and I feel myself being frustrated by her.

She makes a good point, though I'm not sure how they'll ever be able to prove it comes back to me. It's my decision to just make it painfully obvious so when they

finally connect the dots, they'll realize I'm not putting up with their bullshit and just stop coming to my house.

"Then just take it in two sessions. What's wrong with that?" I suck on my cigar, now almost gone. The tobacco is beginning to taste dry from the heat of smoking it for so long, and I'm beginning to grow impatient.

"Because, dumbass, they know how to add. It doesn't matter if I take twenty-K all at once or if I take it ten-K at a time. It's still the same amount. They'll still add it up. I don't want to be caught." Now the typing has stopped and she sounds pissed. "It's bad enough that I have to do your dirty work because you're incapable. You could at least listen to me. I know what I'm doing."

"Just do what you're told, Micah." I hang up my phone and lock it, then slide it into my pocket and put the cigar out. I don't like my orders being questioned even if it is by my own wife. "What is it?" I snap, now in a sour mood.

Vic puffs out some smoke and stamps his cigar out too. "Chris needs us in security, says the guys are back."

Just what I need—more frustration when I'm already in a mood. I rise and follow Vic to the door, and Celia calls after us, "Don't take too long, fellas. I have questions."

"Just make this place look like the Taj Mahal or something," I tell her, waving my hand as we walk out the door.

Moments later, we're in the security office hovering over the monitors again. Christopher points the men out, a few different ones than before. They're once again hovering over a blackjack table with several large stacks of chips in front of each of them, probably equaling more than ten grand each. Maybe I'm too picky, but every cent they take comes out of my bottom dollar and I don't like it.

“So we’ve watched them over the past week. It’s always a different set of guys, always Russian accents. They like table seven the most, but they also frequent table four and table one.” As he speaks, he works at his computer, pulling up the feed for table seven where the men sit on his large screen. “This pair has been here twice this week around this same time Monday and then today. And there have been at least five pairs, all at different times.”

“Five pairs?” Vic asks, squinting at the large monitor hung between several rows of smaller ones. “Isn’t that like fifty grand a day?”

Christopher’s fingers fly over his keyboard as he answers. “Yeah, so that makes a quarter mil this week alone.”

My chest tightens in rage. First, Micah stealing from me and now, these asshats. I fixed my first problem, and whether she likes it or not, she’s going to help me fix this one.

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“Watch them. I want account numbers and transfer details.” I turn to start for the door when Christopher stops me.

“Wait, Boss... Look at this,” he says, pulling up his feed. It’s a detailed rundown of all the amounts these men have taken, all going to different bank accounts worldwide. “And they’re just finishing up.” He nods at the screen.

I wait there, watching as they move from one monitor to another, coming into view on each of the different cameras until they appear at the office where they’ll cash their chips out. One of the men is familiar. I’ve seen him before. But there’s a new guy I’ve never seen, and I can tell they’re getting smarter, trying to avoid detection with new men and new accounts. They don’t fool me. They’re probably paying poor, innocent people a cut of their winnings to come steal for them.

“How much?” I ask Christopher as he stares down at his computer.

“Thirteen grand today.” His eyes rise to meet mine, and I bite back an angry remark, then I head out.

I don’t care if Micah is getting squeamish about things. I won’t stand for this a second longer. She’s going to take every single cent of that money back, and I’ll be paying a visit to Bratva territory soon if they don’t get the point and back off.

I head straight to the back door and into the parking lot. I want to go home and talk to her face to face. The risk of her being caught is so marginal, at this point, it’s almost nonexistent. Sure, they’ll figure out it’s me, but to pin it on her isn’t ever going to happen, especially since I distanced myself from her family. She thinks she bought

her father freedom in exchange for her work when what really happened is I pushed myself back from that table to create a buffer so my own hidden network wouldn't be exposed.

"Santoro!" I hear behind me, and the booming baritone only further aggravates me.

I turn to see the man from the gambling floor standing near the building, as if he'd come expecting me to be here. It's a sickening thing, really, to know your enemy hunts you like a lion preys on gazelle. They know me well enough to know my reactions. I look up at the camera and know it's picked them up. They can't do anything to me without jeopardizing their futures.

"Can I help you?" I ask, reaching into my pocket for my key fob. I quietly click the unlock button and prepare to leave if needed in an emergency.

"We know you're taking our money," the unfamiliar man blurts out.

"And we know you have Micah DeSantis doing it." The Russian with the face I recognize may be nameless, but he's just made my list. I stiffen and square my shoulders.

"You know nothing. I've had money stolen from me. And Micah is my wife, not my employee." So they've figured it out, which means I need to up my security and keep her safer now. Probably her father and brother too. Sick fucks won't stop at hunting my asset. They'll destroy her heart so she's useless to me.

"So, you're denying she stole from you? And now you're married to her... How convenient." The men move closer as I ponder their words. No one could ever have known it was Micah who stole from me unless someone on the inside squealed, and none of my men would dream of that. Which only leaves Micah's father. If they squeezed him already, though, he'd have told her.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I married her, but she never stole from me.” Directly, I add in my thoughts. She stole from my businesses, though she’s in the process of stealing my heart, which I may willingly give her before this is all over.

“Well, she’s stealing from us, and we know you’ve put her up to it. We want our money back.” They’re closer now, close enough to hit my center mass if they pull a weapon. I take a step backward until my hand rests on my car’s door handle.

“That sounds like a you problem, gentlemen. Now if you’ll excuse me.” I slip into my car, shut the door, start the engine, and drive away before they can come any closer.

I still don’t care. Micah will be safe enough at my home, and she will take that money back from those bastards. If it’s the last thing I do, I will bankrupt them.

15

MICAH

It’s been two weeks since Luke told me off for challenging his decision to steal back every cent his supposed card counters won at his casino. I’ve worked with dozens of account numbers, probably fifty transactions now, and it’s hard keeping up. I don’t know why he doesn’t just kick them out for cheating, but he’s a man who has his own means and methods of doing things. Though his promise to keep me safe and protect me from any backlash isn’t so reassuring.

My hacking can only entertain me so long, though, and I get bored. It’s difficult doing it alone, too. Dale is worthless. He knows less than Will, and Will’s degree isn’t even finished. As I progress through this task—siphoning a measly hundred grand from what Luke called his “Albanian rivals”—I think of my best friend and wonder what he’s up to.

If he were here with me right now, he'd be opening the back door into the system for me, monitoring traffic to make sure I'm not being noticed, and a few other small tasks. I miss doing this with him, the banter we used to exchange, and just having someone to talk to. It's boring being alone—or virtually alone—all day long and staring at a computer. Dale may as well not even be here anymore. I'm not sure why Luke keeps him around.

“Yes, come on, come on,” I say to myself, cheering myself on as the algorithm runs its course. The code scrolls up the screen, populating from the bottom up as my hands work their magic on the keys. Normally, Will would be here cheering for me, cautioning me about dangers and otherwise being my best friend. I hate how silent it is in here.

“Shh,” Dale hisses, staring at the colored cubes falling across his screen as he plays his game.

I roll my eyes at him and continue my chase until I've scored the jackpot and the funds start transferring. When my mouth emits a shrill shout of victory, Dale scowls at me and closes his program. He stands and walks out, probably to piss or get a new soda. His workstation is covered in soda cans and half-eaten snacks while mine remains pristine and clear of any debris or substance that could damage the hardware.

I watch him leave and sit back after a few last keystrokes backing me out of the system. I miss Will, and I want to hear his voice, but he hasn't answered his phone in the month I've been here. In fact, he hasn't responded to my texts either. But I pull my phone out anyway and shoot him a new text message.

Micah 11:18 AM: Hey dufus, text me. I miss you. Just because all this happened, doesn't mean we can't talk.

I leave it at that, knowing he's probably afraid. He already had qualms about working

for my father at the jewelry store when he knew the Santoros were in charge. Dad reassured him enough that he loosened up and came and helped me, but he was always nervous.

I'm still happy over my recent hack and I want to celebrate. I know Luke will be happy too, though his praise has been hard-won lately. Something changed in him when I questioned his decision-making in regard to how much and how often I steal back casino transfers. I might just be imagining it, but I think he's gotten moodier, maybe more controlling. He knows I'm not about to just take off and leave forever—I'm not stupid. He'll hurt my father or hunt us down anyway, at least if we don't have a solid plan first. So when I asked if I could take the ankle monitor off for good—not just for when we go out to dinner wearing fancy clothing—he snapped at me.

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I hate being treated like an object, but I'm starting to settle in to being his wife. It has its perks—like all of his servants listening to me. Some of his men listen to me too, but at least I know all their names now, and they take orders from me too, so long as my orders don't conflict with Luke's. And then there are the warm conversations between us when we lie in bed before we fall asleep.

Luke tells me about his day, though I'm positive he withholds some facts. I tell him about what I've done for him, and at least half the time, our nights end in sex before he holds me to sleep. I'm not in love with the man, though I could see myself getting there. I just hate that everything he does is criminal. I always thought I'd be with a good and kind man, someone my father approves of and whom my mother would be proud of.

Deciding I need a drink, I stand and pick up my phone from the table next to my keyboard where I laid it when I sent Will that text. If anyone knows where Will is and why he's not responding, it'd be Nathan. So, while I head to the kitchen to scope out the fridge and find a soda or something, I call my brother. The first time, it goes straight to voicemail, but I know all he's doing rightnow is sweeping the jewelry store or something boring like that. He's the least adventurous person I know.

So, I call again and he answers.

“Hey, Micah, how are you? Are you okay?”

Every time I call Dad or Nathan, they instantly think it's a tragedy and that I'm in danger. The reaction was sweet in the beginning, but after a month now, I'm sort of over it. I have to explain to them every single time we talk that this was my choice

and that until I believe it's safe to get out, I have to stay. What they don't know is, the longer I stay here, the more I want to stay. Maybe it's because Luke isn't the big, bad, scary Mob boss I thought he was. He isn't beating me or putting a gun to my head. He's actually a decent man beneath the surface. Maybe my perception would be different, however, if I saw him at work. I know my father is still scared.

"I'm fine, Nate. How's Dad?" I push open the swinging door that leads to the kitchen and my refreshments and head straight for the fridge.

"He's good. Had a spill yesterday evening, but nothing's broken. I bet his ass has a big bruise, though." Nathan is a bit too nonchalant about our elderly father having a fall, but as long as Dad is okay, I'm okay.

"Did you go to the ER, get him checked?" I pull the fridge open and find a sparkling water. It hisses and pops as I open it and slurp a long drink from it as Nathan explains what happened.

"Yeah, he slipped on a puddle by the back door after the delivery. We closed the shop down and locked up and I drove him to the hospital. They did X-rays and nothing is broken, but they told him if he has pain in his hips to come back. He's just lounging at home while I run things here for a day or so." He sounds calm about being in charge of everything, which is totally unlike him, but I suppose he's probably just playing down so I don't worry.

"Fuck's sake, that's intense. I'm glad he didn't break anything. Why didn't he call me?" I perch on a bar stool and feel the chill of the metal seep through my shorts, new—courtesy of Luke and his insistence that I have a full wardrobe delivered. Most of it's okay, but not quite my style.

"Didn't want to stress you out. You have enough to deal with..." I hear rustling and wonder what Nathan is up to right now, but the reason for my call is more important.

“Hey, what about Will? Maybe he can help you out with the store while Dad’s recovering.” I sip the sparkling water and wait for Nate’s response. Typically, he’s the one to shy away from such responsibility, but maybe he’s had a change of heart since I’m not around. He knows Dad can’t do it alone, and I did so much for them that I can’t do now.

“Honestly, Micah, I don’t think he’s going to speak to me at all.” He sighs, and I feel my heart drop.

“Why not? I mean, he always helps with the books.” I bite my lip, wondering what could upset Will so much that he’s not coming around. I’d have thought he’d be worried, especially given the fact that I was snatched right off the street in front of him. We’re best friends.

“Well, he just stopped talking to us. He mentioned how worried he was at first, a few days after you vanished. When Dad told him you agreed to marry Mr. Santoro, Will was pretty freaked out.”

“What did he say?” I asked, now fully chewing my bottom lip. No way Will would desert me entirely. We were too close for that. I knew he didn’t like the idea of being around organized crime, but he wouldn’t just ditch me. He’d find a way to get me out—that was his nature.

“I don’t really know much. Dad was the one who talked to him. You’ll have to ask him. But he seemed pretty upset.”

I frowned, though no one could see me, and set my can of sparkling water on the stainless steel island. If this stupid ankle thing weren’t on my leg, I’d march right over to Will’s family home and demand answers of him. Or I’d show up at the university and make him talk to me. Maybe Luke would let me go visit him, but given how protective he seems over me lately, I doubt that too. I don’t dare just go.

The cuff will sound, and Luke's men will wrestle me back into the house, but maybe I could hack it and leave for just a few minutes.

"Thanks, Nate. I gotta run. Tell Dad I'm going to figure out how to fix all of this. I love you guys." I hang up the phone without even waiting for a response. I'm too upset to even celebrate now.

If Will just ditched me like this, then he must be hurt, and not just scared of my new station in life. But how could I have hurt him? How could my marriage to Luke have done anything other than frighten him? Maybe I'm just stupid for thinking I could ever be happy here, and maybe Dad's fears are right, after all. I stare at the ankle monitor and wonder if maybe I should leave before I get any more attached.

Regardless, it's time for me to figure out a way to get to Will, even if it means actively deceiving Luke. He's my best friend. I have to make things right.

16

LUKE

Everyone in the security office turns their head to take notice of Micah as she walks into the room. Her hair is braided, the long black rope dangling across her chest, secured by a rubber band. It dangles between her tits, partially on display in the ripped T-shirt she wears. I don't remember buying her a torn T-shirt, but she has a very strange fashion sense. Her skirt looks torn too, and I know I didn't buy any torn clothing.

Christopher gawks a little longer than he should as she approaches me with a smile. Vic, having escorted her here, backs out of the office, and Tony and Mark reassume their post by the door.

“Hey,” she says, strutting up to me. Her hands slide into the back pockets of the skirt as her eyes scan across the myriad of monitors. “What’s all this?”

I follow where her eyes lead, staring up at the monitors myself. Micah was supposed to have met me in my office so I can show her around the casino, but Christopher called me up here moments before she arrived to have a look at our card counters and what they’re up to today. I’m still irritated that nothing has changed and they are still up to their tricks despite every cent they steal having been stolen back from them.

“This is our security headquarters for the casino. Mr. Thomas is my head of security.” I gesture at Christopher, who nods at me then sits back down and continues his work at his computer. “And we’re observing a few men who think they can cheat at blackjack. They’re the ones you’re stealing our money back from.” I point them out on the monitor, and Micah looks where I indicate, but her eye is drawn downward after only a quick glance.

“Did you see that?” She walks toward one of the monitors near the far wall and hovers in front of it, staring. Her preoccupation with that camera is odd, but I ignore her. My focus is on the men at table seven who keep raking in the chips. It still boggles my mind that they haven’t given up their charade. I’ve taken every cent they’ve had transferred to their account and then some.

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“Luke, seriously...” Micah’s hand points at the monitor in front of her, but she looks at me. “Come look at this.”

I glance at Christopher, who looks up and in Micah’s direction. He scowls and sighs, then says, “Yeah, it’s a glitch. We’ve been tied up watching those jokers trying to scam us out of money at blackjack. I’ll get to that next week, probably.” His head drops to his keyboard, and he continues working, but I walk over to stand by Micah.

The camera seems to be on a loop, showing the same woman—a waitress—walking up the hallway toward the kitchen on repeat. Each time she walks past the screen is identical, meaning our software has picked up the footage and is replaying it, not showing the new current feed.

“That’s strange,” I say aloud, watching the woman for the third time already. I turn to Christopher. “What’s going on with this?”

Tony and Mark exchange glances and looks of concern, and I notice Micah leaning in to examine the screen more carefully. We’ve been so focused on the card counters, things like this haven’t even piqued my interest, but maybe they should.

“It happens a few times a day. The camera probably needs to be reset or replaced. It just records like normal, but every now and then, it plays it on loop. It will go back to normal in a second.” Christopher doesn’t even look up at me as he gives his explanation, and I know he would never purposefully put this business at risk. He’s very busy doing everything I’ve already asked. He doesn’t have time to worry about camera glitches when we’re already dealing with a large issue. Still, it needs to be addressed.

“Can you fix it?” I ask Micah, and she shrugs.

“Probably. Just point me to a computer.” As she turns, Christopher looks up long enough to point at an empty chair across the room. During peak season and later at night, he has two men in here to keep tabs on things. Micah claims one of their chairs as her own and sits down, already hacking the system before I even walk up behind her.

I lean over her shoulder and watch her work her magic. Every system is different, but she seems to know them intuitively as if she’s their creator. Her fingers speak a language all their own. And after only a few minutes, she is humming and hawing.

“Wow,” she mutters and shakes her head, still typing.

“What is it?” I ask her, now gripping the back of her chair.

“Someone has been in this system. It’s taking commands from a VPN that’s been onionized.” Her fingers move so fast now that I’m not even sure what she’s doing. Christopher, however, must understand perfectly. They start an interchange of commands and retorts that has my head spinning.

“First, we need to isolate the affected cameras from the network. Then, we dive into the logs and see if we can trace the intruder’s steps.” Christopher’s fingers click away at the keyboard beside Micah as he stands hunched over it.

“Isolation? That’s your solution? We’re not amateurs. We should be deploying some real-time intrusion detection systems.” Micah sounds angry, and all I can do is step back and let them work.

“Real-time IDS won’t do squat if the attacker’s already entrenched. We need to cut off their access first.”

“And leave our surveillance blind?” Micah scoffs, “No way. Let's deploy honeypots instead. We'll lure the attacker out and study their tactics.”

“Seriously? That's a surefire way to tip our hand. We need to contain this quietly. We won't know who's done it unless we catch them in the act. We can't scare them off.” Christopher slams his hand down on the keyboard, and I get the picture that Micah has taken over. I'm not educated enough to know who is right or wrong, but I agree with her. We can't lose surveillance for any time at all. Something's going on here.

“Quietly? We're not playing spy games here.” She types away, and in seconds, the live feed is back up and she huffs out a sigh but keeps working. I get the feeling our friends at table seven have done more than count cards.

“It's a distraction...” I mutter, pulling myself away from where Micah sits fixing our issue, which Christopher failed to even flag as an issue.

“What?” he asks, following me.

“They're creating a diversion.” I point at the camera feed for table seven and notice one of our not so friendly gamblers take a phone call. He looks straight up at the camera and glares at it, then nods at his buddy, and the two of them get up and leave without even taking their chips. “They're counting cards on purpose to distract you and keep you preoccupied. They don't care about the fake winnings. That's why they haven't pulled out even though I've taken back every cent.”

“You mean I have!” Micah calls out across the room.

“They kept me busy watching them at the tables so I'd ignore the supposed camera glitch.” Christopher scowls and rubs his forehead, then scurries back to his desk and sits down, and I follow him.

“Besides the kitchen, what’s down there?” I know this place like the back of my hand, but for some reason, I can’t pull it up in my memory right now.

“The vault. Through the kitchen and into the storage area. We have millions in there, unmarked, untraceable. And we have gold in there too.” Christopher pulls up the feed and does some sort of coding on a black screen, and when his input is denied, he slams his fist down. “Look, they can’t get in the vault without heavy security measures. They’d have had to dress up as casino staff.”

“Which the lack of surveillance in that area would have given them plenty of time for.” Micah finishes her work and stands, then joins me in standing behind Christopher.

“My point is, there is no way they’re getting into the vault without some heavy tools, a pound of C4, and several men to carry the loot out. Our kitchen staff would have caught that.” He shakes his head, and Micah scoffs.

“Well, if they’re posing as staff, you have a problem.” She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest as I nod at Tony and Mark. They vanish instantly, and I watch them on the cameras as they descend in the elevator and head down to the kitchen to check things out. I’ll have to have security in place now to re-vet every employee recently hired and be on standby in case someone tries to make a move.

“Excellent work, mia cara,” I tell Micah, pulling her against my body. I plant a kiss on her lips and feel supercharged, like I need to unleash the tension in my body after all of that.

“Look, it was a good plan on the bad guys’ part. Christopher is human.” Even in her victory, she is humble, and I want to take her somewhere private and claim her as mine.

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“Fix it, Chris,” I bark as I lead her out of the office feeling confident our problems are now over.

Micah hesitates a little, moving slower than me, so I pull her along. When the elevator doors open, however, and she and I are alone, I pull the emergency stop button and pin her against the wall, letting my inner beast come out to be sated.

“That was so fucking fantastic,” I growl, nipping at her neck and letting my lips trace up to her earlobe.

She whimpers and yelps in surprise, but she doesn’t push me away.

“Luke,” she whispers, the sound lost in the confined space of the elevator. I feel her shiver against me, the small tremor lighting a fire within me. My lips find the pulse at her throat, letting my teeth graze over her delicate skin. Her body tenses and arches against me, causing a groan to escape my lips.

My dick throbs as I inch the torn fabric of her skirt upward to her waist, then find the elastic edge of her panties and push them down. She works with me, wriggling out of her panties until they’re around her ankles. “Fuck... This is hot,” she pants, kicking the panties off as I undo my belt and trousers. My cock springs to life, hard and ready for her, and she holds her skirt up around her waist, waiting for me.

“God, woman, you drive me insane.” My hand sweeps over her bare thigh, my thumb tracing small circles on the soft skin. She gasps, closing her eyes as a shudder runs through her. With a jerk of my knee, I nudge her legs apart and slide into her heat with a guttural groan that echoes throughout the silent elevator car. Her body stiffens

in surprise before melting into mine, accepting me fully.

Her hips rock against mine, setting a rhythm of raw need and desire. Her soft cries echo the same emotions coursing through me. One hand finds its way to her hair and tangles in her braid. Her back arches, pressing her body into mine. I feel the shudder rack her body, and she clenches around my thrusts. My breath hitches at the response she elicits from me.

"S—So good," She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders, pulling me even closer to her.

I catch her lips in a searing kiss that matches the pace of our lower bodies. My hand explores the contours of her tits, roaming over her curves and valleys with a primal hunger. The feeling of her tender flesh pressing against mine is intoxicating, a potent cocktail of pleasure and power.

"Luke," she breathes into my ear, her voice shaky. The sound sends a bolt of heat radiating through me, straight down to my core, and I groan in response, my pace quickening.

When I look up at her face, I see her eyes fixed on something, but I don't stop. "Luke," she protests, whimpering through the pleasure I'm bringing her, and I thrust deeper. She's in a trance, staring at something but unable to fight the sensations I'm bringing her, so with a hard smack to the side of her ass, I bring her back to me.

She whimpers and claws at my back, her hips moving in sync with mine as the impact sends a shockwave through her. The sound of my palm meeting her flesh echoes around us. The mixture of pain and pleasure draws a strangled cry from her lips, and I feel a spark of satisfaction shoot down my spine. Her walls clench tighter around me, pulling me deeper into her.

It's hot and fast, her pussy squeezing me and milking me, and all I can think of is the race to climax. We're breathless, lost in the frenzied movement of lovers, my cock buried inside her so deep I can feel my balls drip with her juices.

"Holy... Luke..." she moans, her voice shaky. The sound of my name on her lips is like a drug that I can't get enough of. Her fingers scrabble at my shoulders, digging into the fabric of my jacket as if searching for something to anchor her to reality. I press her harder against the elevator wall, and she gasps.

Overwhelmed by the intoxicating scent of her skin and the hot, carnal rhythm we've created, my hands tighten on her waist. I can feel the throb of her pulse against my fingers and it spurs me on. My name is a plea on her lips as she continues to writhe under me, matching my thrusts with an urgency that sends waves of pleasure through me.

"Micah..." I groan, losing myself in the sensation of her body gripping mine. In this moment, there is nothing else but us. The world outside this elevator doesn't exist.

Her breath hitches as I strike a particularly deep chord within her. Then I feel her coil snap like a guitar string tightened too far. Her body shudders and convulses, and only then does she shut her eyes and enjoy it. I meet her in climax, shooting wads of cum into her body and flooding her. It's exquisite and unrivaled, and I'm lost in the sensations.

When I pull out, we're both panting. My sex drains down her inner thigh, and I tuck my dick back into my slacks and do them up as I push the button to get the elevator going again. But Micah's eyes are open again, back on the spot on the ceiling behind me where she stared the entire time I fucked her.

I look up at it and smirk, winking at Christopher who just got a show. "He's probably beating off now," I chuckle, then look back at her. She's bent over, picking up her

panties, and I snatch them from her and drop them on the floor. “Leave them,” I tell her, and she blushes.

“But...” she protests again, but I shake my head. She sighs softly, cheeks pink with blush, and tucks into my side as the doors open to the casino floor. My head of security isn’t soon going to forget about today, because of the mistake we found and because of that pair of women’s panties in the corner of the staff elevator.

I’ll make sure of it.

17

MICAH

I step out of the shower and grab a towel. After the long day at the casino getting a tour and following up with Christopher after his security concerns, Luke and I are exhausted. He’s so tired he said he’d shower in the morning, and now he waits for me as I twist the towel around my hair to dry it off. I’m glad I was able to help him solve that problem and protect his property, but I’m a little sad that I got his security guy into hot water. He seems like a good guy who just focused on one thing too hard.

Being out of the house again today—only my second time after being taken by Luke’s men—energized me too. I like Luke, and in spite of my initial anger toward him and reservations about our agreement, I think I want to stay. But I want my freedom too. He takes the ankle monitor off my leg when I go in public but puts it right back on when I get into this house. Surely, he can’t think I’m just going to run off and never come back. If he wants this marriage to work beyond what I can give him sexually and financially with my hacking, he’s going to have to trust me.

Besides, I want to visit my family and try to get in touch with Will. I feel bad for scaring him or upsetting him so badly he won’t even speak to me or my family. If I

could just sit down with him and explain why I made the decision I made, maybe he'll come around. And if not, at least I tried to repair the relationship. It's hard for me to just let things be the way they are. After losing Mom, I have a hard time saying goodbye. I want to make things right.

When I'm finished in the bathroom, I head for bed, stopping by my dresser to tug on a shirt and pair of panties. My heart is heavy now after thinking of Will, and I want to call him, but it's late. He'd never answer me on a good day this late, so I have to wait until tomorrow. Though, I know he'd answer the door if I knocked. It's just the sort of guy he is.

"Everything okay?" Luke asks as I crawl into bed. He's been dozing already. His eyes are full of sleep. I curl up next to him, and he turns onto his side to face me.

"I'm alright. I just keep thinking about my friend Will." I don't meet Luke's gaze, but I notice out of the corner of my eye that he grimaces. He doesn't know much about my life before coming here other than that my father was obligated to him and now he's not. He hasn't asked me much about my life.

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“I’m sure he’s fine,” Luke growls, then turns over. He’s acting jealous, though he has no reason to be. If he took the time to ask me who Will is and why I’m thinking of him, he’d understand. I’m not planning to offer details, though. I want to be valued for who I am, not just for what I do. Luke clearly sees my value as his asset, but I don’t think he sees me as a partner yet, at least not in the marital sense.

I’m so frustrated by it that I lie wide awake long after Luke is fast asleep. I listen to his snoring fill the air and try to turn over and plug my ears, but I can’t shake the idea that something is actually wrong with Will. It’s not like him to just go completely silent. He’s never gotten so upset with me that he just stopped speaking to me, and it hurts that he has.

My mind starts to replay everything that’s happened. I’m stuck here hacking for a Mob boss, and my best friend used to help me with this sort of thing. Now he isn’t speaking to me, despite everything we’ve been through, and my new boss-slash-lover won’t let me leave our house without an escort. It doesn’t add up. If Luke’s done something to Will, I’m going to kill him myself.

Anger forces me out of bed. I slip on a pair of jeans and grab a sweater and socks and head down to my makeshift office inside Luke’s office. As long as I’ve been doing this and for how big this place is, I should have my own office by now. But I never complain because who knows what may happen to me if I do? I just take the orders in stride and do what I’m told, just like Dad told me to.

But tonight, I want to be bad. I want to break the rules and resist Luke’s leadership. I want to do what I know is the right thing, and no one is going to stop me. Yes, the cameras track my every move, but after ten weeks of being here, I know no one is

watching these cameras all night long. Besides, this isn't the first time I've gotten up in the middle of the night with insomnia and gotten to work.

I plop down in my chair and power my computer on as I slide my feet into my socks and shrug into my sweater. The screen flickers to life, and I enter my password. At first, I don't really know what I'm doing or why I'm here, but it hits me that if I can hack into Luke's casino security system and fix it, I can hack into his home security and screw it up. I'm more capable than the half-wit Luke's enemies had tampering with the camera I fixed.

So that's what I do. I dive into the hack with one niggling motivation. I want to go to Will's house, and that means I have to be able to make myself vanish on this home security first, and if I can pull that off, I can disarm this ankle monitor. Then all I have to do is catch a cab across town to his house and say what I need to say. I can be back before first light, and Luke will never know. It's not like I intend to leave for good. I just want to see my friend.

My fingers find the right combination of letters and numbers, typing in the commands and prompts that help me slip right into the weak firewall. He really should fix that, and when I'm done with what I need to do, maybe I'll fix it for him. It's the least I can do.

In no time, I have the entire system down then rebooted with myself in control. I order it to create a twenty-minute loop and then set it to play.

When that is functioning how it's supposed to, I turn my attention to the ankle monitor. This one will be a bit trickier. First off, I've never hacked something like this, and secondly, this isn't monitored by some third-party security company. I've seen the app on Luke's phone when he disarms the thing so I can go in public. If I screw this up, it will alert him immediately at the very least, and he warned me that it will set off an alarm. How and where that alarm sounds is anybody's guess.

But I attempt it anyway. I run into a much stronger security protocol and fail several times at breaking through the firewall. I can see why police use these things to keep track of criminals, including cyber criminals like me. There are so many layers to the security, I'm not sure I can actually hack through them all. I may be better off to take my chances cutting the damn thing off and making a run for it. But that would only make him think I'm running away.

I'm not. I don't want to. I think I am falling in love with him. I just want him to respect that I have a life outside of him and his jobs for me that I miss and want back.

Somewhere about an hour into this hack, I make a huge mistake. I'm not even sure what it is I've even done wrong, but the alarm starts blaring, both in the room and on my leg. I panic, pushing buttons on the cuff to try to silence it, then turning to the computer to try to shut the thing off, but by the time I get it silenced, it's already drawn attention.

I look up to see Vic and another man I don't know storm in, followed by Luke who looks like he's been drooling. I cower as Vic grabs me by the bicep and pushes the power button on my computer, glaring at me, and Luke shakes his head.

"Look, you don't understand. It's not what you think." I try to get away from him, squirming and pulling my arm. His grip hurts, especially when he forces me forward toward the door, and Luke who looks so angry with me, he could kill.

"And exactly what was it, then?" he snarls, taking over where Vic leaves off as he gives me a hard shove.

"I wanted to go see if Will is alright," I whimper, being dragged up the hallway now. My arm bends at an awkward angle, and I yelp in pain, but Luke doesn't relent. He's seething mad, stomping his feet and glaring. "Please, I just wanted to see him. I wasn't trying to run away."

Luke is silent other than heavy breathing. And when I stop and pull back, he yanks me forward, causing me to stumble and fall. After which, he picks me up and throws me over his shoulderlike a rag doll, and I kick and scream, pounding my fists into his back.

“Let me go, you barbarian. I have rights!”

“Shut up,” he orders, and I see him turn toward the old room, the one where he locks me up, not his bed. Not his warmth. Not with him.

“No, please, Luke. Please, I wasn’t leaving. I was just going to check on my friend.” Tears well up in my eyes. I don’t want this. I don’t want to be alone. I want his warmth holding me. “Please, baby.”

“You disobeyed me and now you have to be punished.” Luke slams the door open and storms into the room, dropping me on the bed.

“You have to believe me. I just wanted to see my friend.”

“I’m your friend now, Micah. Me. No one else.” His nostrils flare, and he backs toward the door.

“Please. I need to find out if he’s okay. He hasn’t been speaking to me.” I slide across the bed, hoping to get to him, to reach out and touch him. “Please don’t leave me here. I want to be with you.”

Luke looks hurt now too, not just angry. The tiny lines around his eyes are different when he’s just angry. He doesn’t believe me. He thinks Will is more than a friend to me. He thinks I was running away from him or cheating on him.

“Please, I love you,” I whimper, reaching for him. But he backs out the door and

slams it, and I hear the lock click into place. “No!” I cry, running to the door. I jiggle the handle and sob, leaning against the wood. “No, please,” I call out as tears sluice down my cheeks. “I wasn’t leaving. I don’t want to leave.”

My body slides down the door, and I land in a heap, curled up and crying. I don’t have my phone or my computer, no way of contacting the outside world or even Luke if I wanted to. My heart hurts, my arm hurts, and now I’m alone. This isn’t what I wanted at all, but now my heart craves home like never before.

18

LUKE

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:03 am

My head is pounding, throbbing with a hangover after staying up until nearly four a.m. unable to sleep. I downed at least half of the bottle before I felt like I could rest, and even then my rest was fitful, fueled by anger and outrage that Micah would try to run off in the middle of the night.

I rub my eyes and wince at the light streaming into my bedroom between the curtains. The sun is up at least halfway to midday, and I'm still sleeping. I must have slept right through my alarm, but my staff know that even if I'm not on time or functioning at capacity, the businesses must be run, and things must go on.

Feeling heavy and awkward, possibly still a little drunk, I reach for my phone on the nightstand. When I look at the notifications, I'm reminded of how suddenly I was awakened from sleep, only to rush downstairs and see Micah in her rebellion. She was so shocked, so angry. I feel the tender bruises on my back and shoulders from her fists pounding me as I carried her.

My chest feels tight with anger and disappointment as I look at the time. Nearly ten a.m. Breakfast must already be cold, but I push myself off the bed and grab my house robe. I send a text to Christopher asking him for an update, and then to Vic telling him I'd like my wife to join me for breakfast now. They know I locked her up, but they all obey her orders now too, so long as those orders don't directly defy mine. She's probably already had her breakfast served to her, but I don't care if she eats with me. We have to talk.

On my way down to the kitchen, I pause near her door. I hear sniffing, and though I could open the door and have the talk with her here, I need it to be on my terms, in my space. This isn't a marital feud. This is an act of obstinate rebellion. Anyone else

would have been severely punished last night, but not her. Not after the connection we've shared.

"Morning, Mr. Santoro. I'll have your breakfast in just a few minutes." Ellen smiles politely, though it's not her job to cook for me, and shuffles off to the kitchen as I sit down at the dining table. The room feels hollow without Micah here. She'll be here soon if she knows what's good for her, but after weeks of taking every meal together, sitting at this large table alone feels isolating. Lonely.

The room is cold too, as if someone turned off the heat last night, but I know it's just my disappointment and frustration. I spent so many years dining alone, I'd gotten used to it, and now after sharing those meals with her, it feels odd, sad even. She brought a light into this home I never knew could exist, a passion for everything I do that I never thought I'd ever experience. If she really does want to just up and leave, then perhaps we don't have what I thought we had.

The door swings open, and Ellen pushes a cart through, loaded down with two trays of food and a carafe of what I can only assume is hot coffee or juice. She silently serves me, setting the second plate at the place on the table where Micah has been sitting. Her smile as she works is pleasant, though I'm not one to pay much attention to the emotions of my staff. At least I never have been. Micah changed that about me by pointing those things out.

When Ellen begins her retreat, I do as Micah has always done. I thank the maid for her service. "Thank you, Ellen. I appreciate your help."

She looks up at me, surprised, and then nods once and disappears, just as Micah enters the door on the other side. She wears the same wrinkled T-shirt and sweater. Her jeans, however, don't look slept in. She must have taken them off when she got tired. But her eyes are sunken and dark, her hair mussed. She didn't sleep well either.

“Sit,” I tell her, pointing at her chair, but instead of sitting, she merely stands by the door scowling at me. Her fingers tug at the hem of the sweater, then she pulls the sleeves down over her hands and crosses her arms over her chest. Her defiant nature is what sparked my curiosity with her to begin with—a woman who would openly resist me and my words meant a strong woman.

Now it only means one thing—rebellion against me. And I don’t like that.

“I said, sit,” I say again, this time louder, and she huffs a sigh but stays put.

“I wasn’t running away.” Her toe taps on the wood floor, but I can’t hear it. Her stockinged feet are quiet, barely audible in their fidgeting. “My family is worried. My best friend Will—who is very gay, by the way, so no threat to you—has gone silent. Hewon’t respond to me and he won’t respond to my family. I want to know what’s wrong with him.”

She means her words as an attack on me, perhaps an assault on my snap judgment last night. I don’t care. I’m the head of this house, and when I say to do something, people do it.

“Sit. Down. Now,” I say, punctuating each word separately.

Her obstinate look only grows firmer on her face. Her shoulders square, and I can see she’s never going to listen to me willingly. I have to remind myself that this is my wife. That right now, she could be carrying my child, my heir. As angry as she makes me, as much as I want to punish her to the furthest extent of my capability, I can’t lift a hand against her.

“You were just planning to leave? To run off in the middle of the night?” It’s hard to keep my tone even or steady. My temper is already out of control, my voice raised. I don’t know if it’s the idea that she’s defying me or the thought of what I’d have felt

like waking up to her being gone.

“I planned to come back.” Her tone is cold, and she looks away, at the fireplace near the far wall. The window behind me probably makes my silhouette look menacing and dark. It’s the way my father would have been, the way I’ve been until she came into my life. Maybe that’s how I want her to see me right now, like a threat. Or maybe I want to know more, like whether she cares. Being scared of someone is good enough reason to run, or even to stay.

“By lying to me and manipulating my security system you?—”

“Will you listen to yourself!” she snaps, eyes now wild and fiery. Her hands gesture angrily as she talks. “I told you I would marry you and protect my father. I have done everything you asked. I helped you with problems that weren’t even my field of expertise. All I want is to check on my family and friends.” Her head shakes slightly, and tears well up in her eyes. “I thought you weren’t as bad of a monster as my dad told me you were. I was wrong. I thought I could love you, that we could be happy together. I know I was wrong. You’re as sick of a bastard as I originally thought you were. I hate you.”

Micah turns and storms out the door, leaving it swinging back and forth in her wake. I watch after her, trying to make sense of everything that’s happened. She is the only person alive whom I’ve allowed to speak to me like this, and even I don’t understand why I’m allowing it. That cuff on her ankle keeps her here in this house where I can watch her, but what if I don’t even need it? What if she is telling me the truth and she has no intention of leaving me?

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of the pocket of my house robe and look at the screen. It’s a notification from Christopher. His message is long. I can only read the first line, so I swipe to open my messages app.

Christopher 9:57 AM: Micah was right, sir. We had an attempted breach this morning. I watched the camera, and four men wearing casino uniforms entered the kitchen with a cart. The chef was in on it too. They went after the safe and our men stopped them. I have them in holding for you to question. It's a good thing we fixed that camera. Who knows what they would've gotten.

Reading that message, I realize Micah really is trying to help me. She never had to fix the camera or even point out the glitch. And the fact that it turned into our catching the men who were attempting to rob me of my cash and gold is just another layer to this entire thing. She really has helped. So maybe she really is telling me the truth and she doesn't want to just run away from me.

Luke 9:59 AM: Call the police. Let them deal with it. I have something to handle here.

I put my phone in my pocket and leave it to my head of security to sort out. Then I eat my breakfast. I'm too angry, my heart too raw, to go after Micah and force her to talk to me. When I calm down, I'll go to her and we'll discuss what happened. And maybe I should check into her family and that friend of hers. An olive branch might go a long way toward mending what is broken. If not, I'm not sure how to handle her. Wife or staff, she's not leaving this house. I'm keeping her, and besides, it's not safe now.

19

MICAH

My body hurts, probably from being dehydrated. I've been here a week locked in this room again without so much as a visit from Luke, though Vic and Mark have been by several times to check on me. Ellen brings my meals and fresh towels, and I spend my time staring out the window. Turns out I can see the very end of the lane leading

to the house, so I can tell when Luke leaves or comes home. I've angered him enough that he isn't speaking to me.

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I'm also not doing any hacking at all. It's as if he doesn't want me contacting the outside world, and I feel saddened by that. I thought we had really connected, so much so that I wanted to stay here with him. After, of course, I've checked on my loved ones, which he can't seem to understand. My heart is too heavy now, though, seeing how he'll treat me if I don't do everything exactly the way he plans. I'd like to think that would change, but the ankle monitor is still on my leg, and I'm locked up again.

I sigh as I push myself off the bed and head for the toilet, rubbing my temples. My body is tired of just sitting and lying. I want to go out and smell the fresh air before fall grips the city and it's too cold to enjoy it. I want to enjoy a cup of hot coffee at a café or sit and watch the birds flit through the air at the park. Instead, I squat on the toilet and relieve my bladder thinking of why things were going so well and Luke couldn't see that I'd never just run off to escape him.

The door to the bedroom opens and closes, and I think it's just Ellen coming to bring my breakfast. I finish on the toilet, ready to ignore her entirely and just have a shower, when the bathroom door pushes open. I've only just flushed the toilet when Luke pops his head into the room.

"Good morning," he says, the deep baritone of his voice rumbling my chest.

I'm instantly surprised and angered by his appearance. After a week in this room without a single word, he comes in with his kind tone and intoxicating scent, and I don't even know what he wants. For all I know, he's here for a booty call and I'll just be the princess locked in a tower from now on.

“Hello,” I reply coldly, stepping in front of the sink to wash my hands. I won’t shower now, not with him standing in the open doorway watching me. He doesn’t deserve to see my body, not after the way he manhandled me and locked me up. If he’d come back the next day, perhaps I’d have been a bit more forgiving. Even the next evening, maybe I would feel differently. But he kept me here for a week with no contact.

“The men who hacked our system tried to get into the vault. You caught them... Well, Christopher caught them, but it was because of your work. If that camera had stayed under their control, they’d have gotten into the vault and stolen a lot of money from us.” He leaned against the door jamb, and I pushed past him and folded the blankets back, then climbed into bed and curled up.

The bed was still warm, which was a mild comfort, and it was the only comfort I’d receive today. My heart was torn right down the middle. Part of me wanted to go home to my father and feel welcomed by his arms. Another part of me wanted to go back to a week ago before this all blew up and be in Luke’s arms again.

“I came to thank you.”

I ignored him, staring at the door which was probably unlocked. I didn’t know if I wanted to make a run for it or just lie here feeling sorry for myself a bit longer. I’d never get very far anyway, and it would only prove his point that I’d been upset with him and trying to flee. Holding my tongue is harder than I thought it would be, though. I have to bite back nasty remarks I want to make about his locking me up and not trusting me. I’ll never be the type of subservient, placating wife he thinks he wants. He should have known that the minute he met me.

“Hey,” he says, folding the blanket back. I hear his shoes drop to the floor, one then the other, and then the bed shakes. I remain facing away from him. I’m too upset to even look at him. I want to go home. “Micah, I don’t say I’m sorry to anyone ever,

but... I'm sorry." His strong hand pulls me back against his body. He's warm and firm, comforting me despite my hostile feelings. I resist feeling close to him, but when he tucks hair behind my ear and kisses my cheek, I sigh.

"You locked me in this room for a week without speaking to me." Tears burn in my eyes, begging to be released in a hot torrent, but I blink them back.

"It's okay to be angry. I know I don't always handle things the most delicately. You deserved better than that." He rains kisses on my cheek and shoulder, and I blink again, but this time, the tears escape.

"I wasn't running away. I am not your prisoner. I'm your wife. I wanted to check on my friend. You just got jealous?—"

"You're right," he growls, gripping my hip hard. I've pushed a button that he doesn't want to hear about, but I don't care. He really hurt me.

"I wasn't going to leave forever. I planned to come back after I spoke with Will." I swipe at my eyes, and he forces me to look up at him. I lie on my back sniffing, shaking, and he grabs my chin and holds it in place.

"We have to have an understanding, Micah. You cannot make me look like a fool in front of my men. Part of the reason for that anklet on your leg is to protect you. My enemies will come after you with everything they have, and your only shot at a normal life is to listen to me. Do you understand? Your father and brother are safe because my guards are with them round the clock, even when your family doesn't see them."

His eyes are stern, piercing, and I'm angry but sober enough to understand he's making an attempt to show me affection even if he is demanding my obedience. I nod, terrified of what he'd do if I don't agree, and he lets the air puff out of his chest

across my cheeks. Then he kisses me, a long, hard kiss whose passion rivals the first one he laid on me. I part my lips to let his tongue enter and feel ambivalent about it.

I want to let myself go and indulge in this feeling, but I also want to get up and leave and never see him again. I love him, and that hurts, that I would come full circle in my feelings for him. I should hate him and everything he stands for. It's dangerous and terrifying. But I care about him, about his heart, his business, and what he'd do without me.

So, I let him kiss me and touch me and undress me until we're under the covers and our bodies collide with passion. His fingers trace the contours of my body with a gentleness that's almost disarming, making me forget, if only for a moment, the harsh realities of our existence. My body responds to him in turn, coming alive with sensation that has me melting beneath him. Until his fingers pinch a nipple and twist it hard.

"Ah..." I arch my back, leaning into his touch inadvertently as his mouth slips over my body, closing around my nipple. His teeth replace his fingers, nipping and biting, and I moan and writhe. My groin burns and aches for him to touch me and he doesn't disappoint.

His hand sweeps down my body, between my thighs, his fingers finding the heat and wetness that betray my desire for him. A cruel smile plays on his lips as he savors the soft gasp that escapes me.

"Tell me you want me," he demands, his voice a low rumble that tickles my ear. How can I not tell him that? My pussy screams for him to have me and make me his, mark me so everyone knows it too.

In answer, I thrust myself against him, my own hands seeking the hardness of his body, tracing the contours of muscle under smooth skin. There is no denying I want

him. I am angry, yes. But there's something about this man, this dangerous love we share, which makes me yearn for him even when I am seething. And it doesn't hurt that the way he touches me has me spiraling into a world of ecstasy that numbs my sense of discretion.

"Yes... I want you," I whisper, my voice trembling as desire takes hold of me, making me temporarily forget the pain and fear buried within my heart.

A smirk graces his sinful lips while his fingers continue their exploration of my skin, paving a path of molten fire along my curves. His rough hands handle me with a seductive mixture of dominance and affection which sends wild shivers down my spine. He rises up, grabbing my hips and flipping me over. A whimper of shock escapes my lips as he plants me on my belly, then hoists my hips into the air. It all happens so fast, I don't have a chance to process what's going on.

"Fuck," I hiss out as his firm grip spreads me to his view. His breath, warm and steady, ghosts over my exposed skin. I can feel his lustful gaze burning into me. It sends a shiver down my spine—the type of fear that thrills and terrifies in equal parts.

"You're so beautiful," he purrs, an odd moment of tenderness among the storm brewing between us.

He skims a hand down my back, tracing the curve of my spine before resting on my hip, his grip firm yet gentle. I gasp as his other hand descends, reigniting the burning sensation in the pit of my stomach as he massages my sensitive nub. His fingers move deftly, stirring the ache within me to a fever pitch. My fingers curl into the bedsheets, drowned in the intoxicating sensation. His touch is commanding, and I am his subject, fully at his mercy.

When his lips brush over my moist valley, I shudder. His tongue dips into me, sending me spiraling. He licks and sucks, pushing against my entrance with his nose

and my ass with his thumb. I'm on the edge in seconds, trembling and begging him to fuck me. But all he does is tease me, stroking and pushing me closer to climax while withholding the pleasure that I deserve. I back into him, but he pulls away.

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"You're mine, Micah," he says with an air of possession. His voice is rough, a stark contrast to the softness of his touch. It's a reminder that this is not just about pleasure—it's about control. And yet, paradoxically, that only excites me further.

Before I can respond, he thrusts into me. A gasp tears through my throat, and my body arches against his, the sudden intrusion both a shock and a pleasure. My hands grip onto the sheets below me as my body adjusts to his size. He's gentle at first, setting a maddeningly slow pace that only amplifies the raw sensations coursing through me.

"Luke..." I whisper his name, giving in to him completely, entrusting him with my body, with my pleasure, with who I am. It's madness how much I trust this man, but in these intimate moments of shared desire and passion, it doesn't seem so crazy.

His hand continues to stroke my clit in time with his thrusts, and it isn't long before I can feel the building wave of ecstasy cresting within me. My breath hitches, the room around us fading as I drown in a sea of pleasure that's both overwhelming and intoxicating. A guttural moan escapes my lips, echoing off the walls, but it isn't until his palm connects with my ass in a hard slap that I spill over the edge. My body clenches around his dick, convulsing and spasming.

The tremors have my stomach doubling, screams buried in the comforter as he fucks me harder. Hair covers my face. His hand comes down on my ass again and again, and all I can do is ride it out, helpless against his erotic assault on me. Never has it felt this amazing. Never have I wanted to feel his cock throb inside me so badly.

"That's it... let go for me," he murmurs, his voice low and commanding. His hand

tightens on my hip, guiding me through the trembling aftershocks of my release. And then he thrusts deeper, quickening his pace until his own climax hits him. He cries out, burying himself deep within me as the world shatters around us. There is a moment of pure, raw intensity where we share each other's ecstasy, our bodies intertwined in a dance of carnal desire. I can feel his heart pounding against my back, matching the rhythm of my own.

Gradually, he slows his thrusts until he's finally still, collapsing onto me. His heavy weight is comforting, grounding me as reality seeps back into my senses. The room is filled with the scents of sweat and sex, a testament to our lust-filled encounter. And when he rolls to the side, pulling me against his chest, I feel no different than I have any previous time we've had sex—sated, comfortable, and connected.

Except for one thing. This time, I know the dangerous things at play in his world. Men willing to brazenly cheat at his games and infiltrate his businesses for nefarious purposes. But what if those same men, the ones from whom I'm stealing, come after me?

Can he stop them? Or will I be the next casualty in this war into which I've been forcibly conscripted?

20

LUKE

The alarm on the slot machine to my right sounds as the man seated at it pulls the handle and hits the jackpot. To him, it's a big one, two thousand dollars for the few pennies he's inserted into the contraption, but to me, it's all in a day's work. Wins like that happen once or twice a month at the very most, and if it keeps people believing that their little pocket change can transform into millions, then let them play. By the end of the day, he'll be down a few hundred dollars, and all those

winnings will be sown back into the fertile soil of my empire.

“He seems happy.” Vic nods at the man as we pass by the man who struggles with his little bucket of change as the slot attendant strolls up to him.

“Give him all the free beer he wants while he’s here,” I tell him, knowing the best way to keep a man behind a machine like that is free drinks. We make enough to give every alcoholic in town his fill in liquor. They’d drop a hundred bucks an hour in drinks, but the way gamblers work, they spend far more than that on bets.

“I heard our card counters are down for the count?” Vic isn’t in the loop of what’s going on higher up in the business, but only because we’ve been preoccupied with other things, namely securing Micah’s family interest. Heat has turned up a lot with folks scoping out her father’s jewelry store and home. My gut tells me the Russians have gotten wise to my plan, but the only play they have is to hurt her or her family. They’ll never get near my riches, and unless they hire their own hacker who is smarter or more talented than Micah, they’ll never beat me at my own game.

Her family, on the other hand, is her weak spot, evidenced by her attempt to get out of my security measures to go to them and her friends. With my guards in place following my protocols, she’s untouchable and her work is untraceable. But her father and brother are vulnerable. I know if something happens to them, she’ll blame me and never forgive me, so I’ve already increased security there. As for the friend, I haven’t seen him and he’s on his own if he isn’t even bothering to talk to her.

“In county lockup awaiting trial,” I tell him, realizing he has been so busy guarding the store, he doesn’t even know the latest news.

“Well, that’s good. That was a good save on Micah’s part with the camera. Imagine how much gold they could have moved, how many times they could have accessed the vault.” He pushes his sleeves up and then presses the elevator call button as we

stop to wait for it.

I do think about that. I think about it every night as I go to sleep how Micah saved our asses with her quick thinking and fast wit. I also think about how she's grown quiet on me now. She's in my bed again, but she isn't the same. Her presence seems hollow and cold now, even withdrawn. I see her checking her phone more often, a worried expression on her face as she's hacking.

"Why don't you go on up to talk to Chris? Let him know we need machine thirty-four swept now. And if you see Mark, have him call me. I'd like him to do a check on the jewelry store. We have a few guys over there, but I think we should double up now." I button my suit coat and step back from the elevator as the doors slide open.

I want to head home, be with my wife now, see if I can get through to her and find out why she's sullen and distant all of a sudden.

"Sure thing, Boss. You sure you're good alone?" he asks, and I nod at him. This is my property, complete with security cameras at every angle. There isn't a blind spot in the building other than the restrooms, and only because state law doesn't permit those.

Turning, I head toward the back door, weaving through the staff-only portion of the casino. I receive a few head nods from casino staff and swipe my badge at the back door to let myself out. It's a chilly day, fall beginning to settle over the city, and I walk briskly toward my car, using remote start to get it prepared for my short drive home.

But as I round the corner of the building, I'm taken by surprise as two large men with full beards and menacing eyes cut me off. They stand between me and my ride home, chests puffed out, arms crossed over their chests.

“Mr. Santoro,” one of them says in a thick Russian accent, “we need a word with you.”

His friend, whose eyes seem to bore into me, steps forward and stands a bit straighter. The black leather jackets they wear are embroidered with an insignia, a sickle and a hammer with a redstar, just like the flag under which they serve. They’re not here to talk. Their posture makes it clear.

“Fellas, I don’t have time to talk. I have to get home to my beautiful wife.” I sidestep, trying to pass them, but the larger of the two steps in my way, preventing me from proceeding. “I said, I have to go.”

I’m hot under the collar as a default, but these assholes are making my temper flare. I grit my teeth and take a step backward. If I have to, I’ll put them in their place, but I will not throw the first punch. I don’t feel like going downtown to be processed for assault charges today.

“I said we should talk, Mr. Santoro.” The first man pushes his friend backward and stands toe to toe with me. He’s easily a few inches taller than me, but I’m still not intimidated by them. My security cameras are getting this all on tape. Besides, I know what I’m capable of and even two men this size are no match for me.

“You should make an appointment,” I tell him, looking him directly in the eyes. Men like this only have one thing in mind and it isn’t talking.

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“The Albanians have had money taken from them too. We know it’s your little wifey. We know you’re hiding her from us. We even know how she does it.” He brings his left hand up and grinds it into the palm of his right hand, and I blink slowly to show exactly how not intimidated I am.

“You have no proof,” I say, glancing at the second man who seems agitated and restless. They’re looking for a fight, and I won’t back down if they start one.

“You’re outnumbered, Santoro. Just admit it. We’ve come to collect. We’ll be taking our payment in gold today.” The man pulls his vest open and brandishes his gun at me, tucked into his waistband.

I chuckle at his insolence. Before he can even react, I snatch his gun, drop the clip, pull the slide back to discharge the round in the chamber, and toss the weapon away. As I do, his fist connects to my jaw, but I was expecting that.

My head snaps to the side with the force, my jaw stinging with the impact. I spit a glob of blood onto the sidewalk and wipe the residue off the corner of my lip with a quick swipe of my hand. But I don't go down. Instead, I grin—just a smirk, really, a defiant twist of my lips.

"Gold, you say?" I murmur, even as I raise my fists, ready for what's coming. Without warning, I step forward and land a solid punch squarely in his chest. He grunts in surprise more than pain. Clearly, he wasn't expecting me to retaliate.

As he reels back, the second man lunges at me, but I’m ready for him too. I sidestep, grab him by the thick collar of his leather jacket, and slam him into the brick wall

behind us. His head bounces off with a sickening thud. He groans, slumping down onto the ground, unconscious.

“You guys really are amateurs,” I taunt, shaking my head and wincing at the pain it causes. "Next time you want to threaten someone, make sure you know who you're dealing with."

In the meantime, the first man has recovered from my blow and turns to face me again, anger flashing in his eyes. He charges at me, his fists clenched tight and rage contorting his face. But that's the mistake they always make—letting anger cloud their judgment.

He lunges, attempting to aim a punch at my head. But I pivot, spinning on the balls of my feet, and his fist meets nothing but air. He stumbles forward, momentarily disoriented, and I seize the opportunity. Quickly closing the distance between us, I drive my elbow into his stomach, then follow up with a swift uppercut that knocks him onto his back.

For a second, he just lies there, dazed. Then, he tries to get back up again. A stubborn one, I'll give him that. But I'm not about to let him regain his footing.

"You should've stayed down," I warn him, but it only seems to fuel his determination. He staggers back onto his feet, blood trickling down the corner of his mouth. Hatred burns in his eyes as he lunges at me again. This time, he's more cautious, keeping a safe distance between us. But I can see through his bluffs.

I mirror his stance, circling him as he circles me. We're two predators sizing each other up, only one of us already knows the outcome of this battle. He's scrambling to make his next move while I've already planned my last.

"Enough games, Santoro," he growls, lunging forward again with a wild right hook. I

step back just out of reach, and his momentum carries him past me. Before he can correct himself, I launch forward, catching him in the small of his back with a hard push. His feet tangle together, and he goes sprawling face first into the concrete sidewalk.

I could end it here, could walk away now while he's down and out. But there's a gnashing desperation in his eyes that tells me otherwise—that I need to ensure he stays down. So, I stride forward, each step echoing ominously on the empty street. He tries to scramble away, but his movements are slow, sluggish. I glance back at his unconscious partner, slumped against the wall.

"You had your chance," I tell him as I reach down and pull him up by the collar of his jacket.

His eyes are wide with rage. "I'll kill you, Santoro," he spits through gritted teeth, struggling against my grip. Blood from his split lip drips onto the concrete.

"No," I respond, my voice as cold as the winter wind that blows through the deserted alleyway, "you won't."

I tighten my grip on his collar, pulling him in closer. His breath reeks of cheap booze and desperation, a combination all too familiar in this sorry business.

"You see," I continue, forcing a smile onto my lips as I feel his heart pounding against my knuckles, "you made two mistakes today. First, you underestimated me. Second, you threatened to kill me."

His eyes narrow, defiance blazing in his gaze. I release my hold on him slightly, giving him the room he needs to launch another attack. Predictably, he does. His fist flies toward my face, but this time, I don't avoid it. This guy needs a lesson and I'm more than willing to give it.

His punch lands on my cheek, but the impact is weak, his energy drained from our fight. I stagger back for good measure, allowing him to believe he has an upper hand. His face splits into a triumphant grin at my faked reaction, but it quickly falters as I straighten up, the smirk back on my face.

"Is that all you've got?" I ask, chuckling coldly. His triumph quickly turns into despair, and he takes a step back, suddenly wary of his previous confidence. But I don't give him the chance to escape. I lunge forward, my fist connecting with his jaw in a satisfying thud, and his head slams backward into the brick behind him.

His eyes roll back into his head as he crumples on the spot, limp and unconscious. I release my grip on his collar and let him slump onto the cold concrete. The grim satisfaction washing over me is short-lived, though, replaced by the familiar anger that always rises after an encounter like this.

Now, I need to go home and see Micah. If they really are on to our game, I have to increase security, and her desire to go home and visit her father is out.

21

MICAH

"Yes, but the software patch is just a patch. The code needs to be entirely rewritten or you're going to end up with the same errors." I can't believe how Dale wants to cut corners. Even Christopher doesn't seem to understand, though he's not necessarily a tech guy, more just the brute muscle of Luke's security team.

I sit behind my computer in Luke's office, which has slowly morphed into my office now that I have free reign of the house again. We're working on installing new cameras and upgrading security measures for the casino after the near catastrophe that was averted by my quick thinking. It took a lot for Luke to admit he was sorry for

overreacting to what happened, and though I still firmly believe that his world is far too dangerous for me to be a part of it long-term, I gave him my promise that I won't just run away from him.

Part of me is okay with that promise because I do believe so much as it's in his power, Luke will never let anything happen to me or my family. I just don't like the means by which he will protect all of us if it comes down to it. The men he is stealing from are scary and have no moral compass whatsoever. If they get to me, I'm dead, and if they want to get to me but can't, my family is dead.

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“Alright, Chris said to go ahead with the updates here. They have the new cameras online and ready for your patch.” Dale hovers behind me like a cat ready to pounce. He’s been watching my every move since he learned that I hacked the home security and set the cameras to loop. He fixed that and told Luke, who was angry with me for a day, but he didn’t lock me up again.

He did, however, tell me that if I did something like that again, he wouldn’t be so nice as he was last time. I’m not scared of him because I can see it in his eyes—he cares about me. He’s not going to hurt me or use me as some stupid example of his authority. If he does punish me, the worst I can expect to endure is a week of being locked in a room by myself again. I don’t mind that.

My fingers gracefully dance over the keyboard, filling my need to feel that rhythmic tap that’s so soothing. The adrenaline rush of hacking isn’t present, but I’m being productive. It’s strange how quickly my mind shifted from disdaining Luke’s tasks for me to enjoying them. When I first came here, I hated that I couldn’t use my knowledge of computer science and coding to do something honorable or productive. I hated him for forcing me to do unethical things.

Now, however, the very things I thought I would do with my degree are seeming very boring. Installing software, creating security patches, writing new code for the system—there’s no thrill in it, and it barely holds my attention. I crave the exhilaration of the chase, the feeling of taking a risk and knowing if I make a misstep, I’ll face uncertain consequences.

“Go log in and help me with this patch,” I tell Dale, who has to obey me unless I directly disobey Luke’s commands. I like it that way. Even though this is the easiest

job I've ever been given since coming here and I don't need help to do any of it, he traipses over to his computer and sits down to work.

While he's distracted with my pointless chore, I pull up a new browser and connect to the VPN first, then onionize the connection, routing it through Eastern Europe, the Maldives, the Middle East, and finally, Japan before diving deep. My fingers work the keys like the professional hacker I am now, searching the dark web for the fingerprints I'm so used to seeing.

Will leaves a signature everywhere he goes. It's unique to him, a twelve-digit alphanumeric code he created as a signature for his work. I told him how stupid it is to leave it, but he swears he'll be famous someday and everywhere his "fingerprints" are left will display his work. Now I can use it as a means to find him. I just have to know where to look.

My deep dive takes me places on the dark web that terrify me, into topics and sites I never want to venture close to, but it's Will's specialty. He likes to mess with people and screw up their plans. He once disrupted a sex trafficking ring set to transport women across the border and alerted border patrol agents ahead of time—all anonymously so he would never be tracked. His work is genius, and I'm honored to be his friend, but despite all my attempts to locate him or his signature, the trail is cold.

From what I can tell, he's not been online doing his thing in weeks. I've been here for going on three months, and he's never gone this long without talking to me. My daily calls to Dad and Nathan have proved fruitless as well. They haven't seen him, nor have they had the time to go looking. I don't expect them to care as much. He's not their friend or family member, and they're too busy helping Dad recover and keep the shop going. They don't have time to worry about a complete stranger.

But I have time, and I'm really worried. If Luke can snatch me off the street in this

game of cat and mouse with his enemies, imagine what could happen to a guy like Will who is less than tactful about covering his tracks?

Dale has this software reboot locked down, and I want answers. So this time, instead of trying to sneak out without Luke knowing, I decide to just tell him I'm going. He can send some guards with me if he likes, but I need to go to Will's parents' house and check on him. Not talking to me is one thing, but not getting online to do what he always does is another. His socials have been dead for weeks. His homework hasn't been turned in—yes, I hacked that too—and if his digital signature has gone dark, then something is really wrong. I hope it's just a bad case of the flu, but I can't be certain unless I see him.

I stand and push my chair back, saying, "You've got this. I have to step out..." Then I head out the door and up the hallway to where Luke has himself shut into his den. I saw a few burly men with angry faces being led past the open office door earlier. I assume they're more of Luke's cohorts in crime, though they look more like muscle than brains. They're in his den with him talking. I can hear the rumble of their deep voices as I approach.

I knock softly and wait, but Luke doesn't call to me. I'm antsy, wanting to get out and check on Will and get back quickly, and it makes me impatient. I push open the door, and Luke's scowl catches my gaze.

"Did I tell you to enter?" he asks, and I see large plastic-wrapped packages full of something white, with brown packaging tape wrapped around them. They're all stacked on the table between his dark leather couches, and one of the men has an open briefcase full of stacks of money.

"I have to go check on Will. I was just coming to tell you," I mumble, tearing my eyes off the obvious drug deal going down, but Luke only glares at me as I back out and shut the door. He's too busy doing illegal things to even give a single fuck what

I'm doing, and I don't have patience to wait for him to care.

I march right up the hallway, past the guards and onto the front porch. It's the far end of where my ankle monitor allows me to walk without the alarm sounding. Once I make this decision, there's no going back. Luke will be alerted immediately, and he'll be angry, but I can't care about that right now. Will is too important to me. I can't be afraid of what Luke might do.

Flagging down Luke's driver, who sits in the limo waiting, I call out to him, "I need you to take me somewhere." Then I dash off the steps and climb into the car, listening to the alarms going off inside the house. The driver looks over his shoulder at me through the lowered window and scowls. "I need to check on my father. Please go now."

The driver shrugs a shoulder and turns, firing up the car and taking off. "Which way?" he asks as the car gets to the end of the long, narrow lane. I look back at the house and see Tony standing with a walkie-talkie in hand, watching after me.

"Turn right," I tell him, and then I pull my phone out and begin hacking. It's a pain in the ass on a tiny screen, but I manage to scramble the signal to the car's GPS and the driver's phone before someone from the house can get ahold of him. Unfortunately, it also disables my phone too. But I don't need to place another pointless call. I need to knock on his door and see if he's okay. It's the only thing that will put my mind at ease now.

22

LUKE

When Micah stuck her head into my den to speak with me, I didn't think anything of it. She still had manners to learn, apparently. I continued my meeting with my two

colleagues as planned, but moments later, my alarm went off, and now I'm enraged. My phone blares out the warning that she's left the property, and I pull up the app to track her movements, standing slowly so as not to alarm my guests.

"If you will both excuse me, my right-hand man Mark will come in and assist you in completing this deal." I button my coat and start toward the door, and before I'm even within arm's reach, it opens. Mark appears, and I nod at him. "Finish up. I have to deal with this."

Mark passes by me into my den as I head into the hallway and toward the front door. Vic is there, standing by the door ready to go, and I stare down at my phone in hand, watching Micah's location moving quickly away from the house. She's in a car for sure, probably my own. I attempt to call her phone, but it goes straight to voicemail, so I call my driver whose phone also goes to voicemail. She's probably jamming the signal. It's a good thing this tracking anklet doesn't rely on cellular technology, only satellite triangulation.

"She just walked out, sir," Vic says as I pass him and walk right out the front door. Tony already has my second car pulled around and waiting. Vic moves swiftly with me, both of us climbing into the car.

"At least she didn't take the ankle monitor off." I'm grumbling, but I am thankful for that. Micah will earn a punishment for this little stunt, but I'm more worried about her safety than anything else. She has no idea how dangerous my enemies are and the lengths to which I've gone to protect her so far. Yes, I put her in this danger, but she's not exactly being cooperative, so how am I supposed to keep her safe?

"She's moving fast on Becker Street, Sir." Tony watches the GPS readout on the car's navigation system, cast there by the app on my phone. "Headed north."

She's going toward her father's house which is a place my enemies will know to look

for her. I can't believe how stupid she is being right now. And I don't think it would even matter if I had warned her about the danger, either. She's so damn stubborn, she'd have gone anyway.

"Go faster. If something happens to her, we lose our cash cow." My men know me. I don't make a fuss emotionally over anyone, but losing Micah would hurt—my business and me. I've grown too attached to her, let my guard down a little too much. My bed would feel empty without her.

The tires squeal on the pavement as Tony accelerates into a turn and jets up the street, zipping past parked cars and weaving around slower traffic. My mind races as fast as the car, angry with her for leaving, wondering why she couldn't just wait a few more minutes until my meeting was over. This friend of hers has to mean something special for her to defy me yet again. How can I be angry with someone so loyal? Except that loyalty isn't to me and my rules.

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“There,” I say, pointing at the screen. “She’s going to that house.” Strangely, Micah has stopped now, a few houses down from where her father lives. The fact that she kept the ankle monitor on or at least with her tells me she is planning to return, if she isn’t dead. There is no way for me to know if the Bratva or even the Armenians are there waiting, so I pull my weapon and chamber a round as Tony turns up yet another street, closing in on the signal.

“You think there’s going to be trouble?” he asks, and I hear Vic chamber a round in his weapon from the back seat.

“They know she’s the hacker and thief. If they even have a hint that she’s out and about, she’ll be a target. We can’t be too careful.” My eyes train on the street ahead of us, and my limo comes into view, parked half a block away from where I see Micah walking. She’s taking hurried steps, moving at a quick clip, and her gaze is fixed on one of the row houses. “Slow down,” I tell him, and he obeys immediately, bringing the car to a crawl.

“We’re clear, Boss,” Vic says, and I know he’s not looking at Micah. He’s scanning the street for vehicles that appear to be dangerous—ones that have people waiting in them, watching, or vans that look like they might contain a surveillance team.

I see our car parked farther up the block now, watching Mr. DeSantis’s home as we told Micah we would, but I don’t see any cars that look like those of our enemies either, which is a good thing for everyone. I’m not shy when it comes to spilling blood, but I don’t need any more fuckups or messes to clean up.

“Park here,” I tell him, spotting one space just large enough for our car.

Tony pulls into the space and puts the car in park, but instead of jumping out and following her, I watch her mount the steps to a house and knock on the door. I see a woman, obscured by the frail curtain, peer out at Micah with a surprised expression—as much as I can discern from this distance. The door opens slowly, and soon, Micah is wrapped in an affectionate embrace. My heart clenches at the sight, my fingers tightening around the handle of the weapon in my lap.

The woman's hands move in a sweeping motion over Micah's back, a soothing gesture only matched by the soft look in her eyes. I can't hear her words, but I see the curve of her mouth as she speaks, her voice likely filled with gentle concern and perhaps confusion. I watch as tears begin to pool in the corners of Micah's eyes, spilling down her cheeks and staining her shirt. Beside her, the woman too begins to cry, their shared sorrow seeping out onto the porch and filling the air with a tangible heaviness.

Something must be wrong for both of them to be crying, maybe what Micah fears most. She expressed to me more than once how she felt something was wrong with her friend, but he really isn't my concern. Now I wonder if this is his home, if that is his mother, if perhaps I should have intervened to stop whatever has happened to him.

Suddenly, I see Micah pull back from the woman's embrace. She utters something inaudible, her lips moving rapidly as if she were explaining something of great importance. The woman visibly flinches at Micah's words, her hands flying up to cover her mouth as she shakes her head in disbelief. Before long, both women are crying again, their tears carrying the weight of shared grief and fear.

Micah steps away from the woman, her face as pale as a sheet. She throws one last look over her shoulder at the house before turning away and racing down the front steps.

My eyes, focused and alert, follow her rapid descent. She takes off at a sprint, a

desperate speed fueled by urgency and terror. Behind her, the woman staggers backward into her home, the door left ajar in the wake of Micah's abrupt departure. As for me, I'm left with a decision to make—stay where I am or follow.

"Move," I command Tony, my voice laced with determination. The car rumbles to life, tires squealing against the asphalt as we pull out of our parking spot and begin to chase after Micah.

Her figure grows larger in the windshield as we close the gap between us. She doesn't look back. She can't spare the effort for anything but her headlong flight. Her hair springs free of its ties, spilling around her shoulders and catching the weak glow from the street lamps. She's weeping openly, now—there is no mistaking it. It's a raw, gut-wrenching sound that I can barely hear over the hum of our engine.

In the rearview mirror, I see the woman—perhaps the boy's mother—staggering back onto the front porch of the house. She has a handkerchief pressed to her mouth, sobbing into the fabric as she watches Micah climb the steps to her father's house and open the door, vanishing inside. Tony pulls the car to a stop, and I bark, "Stay here," as I open the door and climb out.

I stash my gun in my waistband and head for the house determinedly, my boots thudding against the concrete of the sidewalk. I try to tamp down my rage, knowing Micah must be terrified to do something so rash and stupid. Still, she doesn't even realize the incredible danger she's put herself in. I follow her path, climbing the stairs to the house and bursting through the door without knocking.

I hear it before I see it—Micah wailing and sobbing. I round the corner and peer through the open archway into the living room. Micah stands wrapped in her father's arms, a young man who looks strikingly similar to her standing with his hand on her back. I assume it's her brother.

“He’s gone, Daddy! I know they took him. They had to take him.” Her sobs are choked by hiccupped gasps for air, and her father looks up at me sternly as I move deeper into the home.

“Shh, baby,” the older man says, trying to soothe her, but I don’t think anything will soothe her now. She’s hysterical. And she’s the only thing I see.

I move toward her, and her father backs away. Only then does she look up and see me, and her eyes light up with rage.

“You!” she snarls, swinging her arms at me. One of them connects to my shoulder before I manage to pin them down at her sides. “You did this! This is your fault! Where is he?” She continues trying to strike me even as I pull her against my chest and squeeze her firmly.

“Micah, I didn’t do this.”

“You did this, you asshole! This is your fault.”

“Micah, listen to me!” I boom, and she falls silent, but her chest heaves. I brought her into my world, yes, but I am not responsible for her friend going missing. But I know who probably is. “We’ll find him, alright?”

She relaxes, slumping against my chest and devolving into louder sobs, so hard her body shakes as she clings to me for support.

“He stopped talking to me because I agreed to marry you, and now he’s gone. His mother hasn’t seen him.” I can barely understand what she’s saying, but I get enough to understand why she blames me. She probably blames herself too, which is something I can’t fix for her. If it was as easy as anger directed at me, she could punish and exact revenge the way I do. It never truly makes me feel better, but there

is a sense of justice so I can move on.

But self-blame is evil, rooted in guilt and regret, and unless we find her friend and bring him home to safety, she will never move past this. God help her if he ends up dead.

“I’m taking you home now,” I whisper to her, then kiss her forehead. “Mr. DeSantis, I’m setting up more guards around your property. I want you to hire someone to run your shop for you, someone not related to you. Any costs you incur, I will cover, but you cannot leave the house. Have your groceries delivered. Stay inside away from the windows.” I give him a stern look, then direct one at his son. “Do you understand?” Both of them nod at me and look frightened.

Then her brother says, “What about Micah?”

I scowl at him and turn with her in my arms, already moving toward the door. “Don’t worry about her. I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

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So the Russians have given up on threatening me and they've moved on to someone new, someone I didn't think I needed to protect. And their plan is working too, forcing Micah to think about what she might lose in this game and not what she is obtaining. As I guide her toward the still-running car to escort her home, I start to formulate a plan to get Micah's friend back. I don't know why he means so much to her, but she's become a loose cannon, and with this much on the line, we can't afford a misfire.

23

MICAH

Luke takes me back to his house which he's calling "home", but it doesn't feel like home anymore. It feels like a horror movie where I'm trapped behind a computer trying to find my way back to who I used to be. He walks me inside and mentions that we should talk, but I ignore him and walk straight to the computer. He said he'd find Will, but he can only do so much. The only way to find him is to look for where he's been.

Plopping down at my computer, I start my search over again, only this time, I start with any security camera within a three-block radius around his house that might have caught anything. My fingers do all the work, but I'm at a loss when I find nothing useful. So, I search the cameras near the school, then near the jewelry store. Everything is coming up empty, though, no matter where I search. I'm growing more and more frustrated by the second.

Someone is actively working against me to keep me from finding him, someone who

is very good at covering tracks. Maybe someone who took him. My fingers fly faster, spamming the hacker with code he has to decrypt before he can continue adding layers to the mask he's using. I'm almost there, seeing hints of Will's work, when they put roadblocks in my way, using my own tactics against me. Will does this stuff for me while I do the hacking. I can't keep up with both things at once.

"Dale!" I scream, frantic to get to Will's signature to locate the IP address where he's hacking from, but Dale doesn't come. If he could do what Will normally does, handling this traffic to allow me to focus, I could do this. "Dale!" I scream again, feverishly typing away, but I can't keep up.

I feel Luke's hand on my shoulder and shake my head as I watch my hard work unraveling. I was so close. I almost had an IP address, which would lead to a location, but there are too many people out there. They have to have Will working for them the way Luke stole me from that street corner and forced me to work for him.

So angry I could throw my computer, I slam the thing closed and lean back in the chair. Luke takes my hand after a few seconds and draws me up out of the seat into his arms.

"Mia cara, we'll find him. I told you that." His thick arms don't feel like comfort right now. They feel like pain and captivity. Like I'm not where I'm supposed to be. Someone I care about is out there right now, suffering because of me. Will did nothing wrong. He got dragged into this by accident. "Come with me," he coaxes gently, and I have no choice but to submit to him.

I follow him upstairs into our room where the bathroom door stands open. He guides me into the bathroom, and I see he's drawn a hot bath. Bubbles are piled high on the surface of the water. A bottle of wine sits on the edge of the sink next to a glass. He doesn't seem angry that I ran off again. Maybe this time, he gets the point that I care about people, unlike him, and I feel guilty for getting those people involved in my

life.

“I don’t want a bath...” I protest, crossing my arms over my chest and planting my feet.

But Luke won’t ever take no for an answer. He puts an arm around my waist and drags me into the room. His strong hands begin peeling my clothing off as he speaks to me in a calm tone.

“I have my best men looking into this, and I know you are too. You can’t work when you’re emotional and flustered. If you want to find your friend, you need to remain calm. Let me help you relax, and then you can go back to work with a clear head.” His fingers pry my arms away from my body so he can remove my shirt and bra, then he tugs my jeans down, along with my panties, and forces me to sit on the edge of the bathtub as he kneels to remove my shoes and then my clothing.

When I slip into the hot water, it sucks the tension right out of me. Luke is right. I can’t focus when I’m so wound up I can’t think straight. I’m really good at what I do, and I know I can find him and beat all the tricks those bastards throw at me if I’m calm and level-headed. I got too emotional.

“Here, bella,” he says, slipping the glass of wine into my hand. “Not too much, but enough to help you relax.”

The wine swirls in the glass, and I stare at it for a hard second. Part of me wonders if he’s drugged it or something, wary of what he may do to me since I left without asking again. But with the weight on my shoulders, the other part of me doesn’t care. I feel helpless and out of control. I bring the burgundy liquid to my lips and drink deeply, closing my eyes.

My mind drifts away to a happier place as I lie here soaking. When I was a child,

Nathan and I used to sing a song when we were happy, something about birds of a feather... That tune plays through my thoughts on repeat, and I start to unwind. Then I feel Luke's warm fingers on my skin, washing me with a soft cloth. I look up at him with sadness, not understanding why he's showing me concern or compassion. Last time, he just locked me in a room.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, feeling the wine make my head spin a little.

"You're worried about your friend. I'm trying to help. I can't type computer code to find him or wave a magic wand, but I want you to know I'm sparing no expense to make sure your family is safe and my men have what they need to find your friend." He dips his cloth-covered hand into the water and rubs my belly, cleaning me.

I sigh and try hard to look away. I want to be angry with him. If I hadn't come here, Will would be safe. I don't even know if he's alive now, after my hacking attempts. They could very well be killing him as we speak. I'm sure people like Luke's enemies aren't in the business of letting hackers know their secrets and then letting them live.

"What if we don't find him? What if they kill him? It's the Russians... I know it is. I saw their code." The same signatures that I've been hacking for months were coming up during my search. I know they took him, probably to force him to steal from Luke the way I've been stealing from them. It's the only thing that makes sense.

"We'll find him. Just relax," he says, and his hand dips to my core where he rubs gently.

A moan escapes my lips, and I meet his gaze. I'm afraid of what is happening with Will, but Luke is the only thing that makes me feel stable and in control right now. I used to believe that about my father. He used to be the one who made me feel stable and in control. Luke has done nothing but control me and force me to do what he

wants. So, why do I still want him? Why does my heart want to lean into him and cling to him?

“Can I help you relax a bit more?” he asks as his fingers search my tender places, stimulating me.

I want to say no because I know my family would want me to resist him, but I’ve shared too many intimate moments with him. I know what he can make me feel, how closely connected I am when we do this. And I know he will keep his word, sparing no expense to make sure Will returns to his family.

I bite my lip and nod at him, and his fingers sink into me, searching my core with hunger. His eyes stay fixed on mine as he rubs my G-spot with two fingers and my clit with his thumb. With his other hand, he slowly undoes the buttons on his shirt, then the fly of his slacks, and when he’s ready to undress, he guides my hand to my valley.

“Touch yourself,” he whispers as he stands to remove his clothing, and in seconds, he’s in the bath with me, making the water overflow the sides as he pulls me onto his body and I straddle him. “Forget everything else. Just think of this.” His thumb is on my clit again, rubbing and massaging, and I raise up just far enough for him to slide into me.

He fills me, pressing deep into my core. I gasp, the sensation of him driving out all lingering fears and concerns. His hands are firm on my hips, guiding me as I move against him. The world shrinks down to the slick slide of our bodies, the fervent rhythm of our shared passion.

“Relax,” he murmurs against my ear, his words a breathy plea. And I do. I release, surrendering to him and the heady sensation throbbing between us. He rolls his hips upward, meeting me thrust for thrust while our bodies move as one. His lips find

mine in a dance as old as time, tongues tasting and teasing until we are drunk on each other.

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When his hands grip my tits and squeeze, I whimper in pleasure tinged with pain. The water sloshes out of the bath onto the floor, exacerbating the mess, but it only adds to the moment, letting go completely to enjoy each other. I rest my hands on his chest and let him take over.

“God... Luke...” I pant, trying but failing to get a grip on his skin. Everything is wet and slick. I’m frantic for release, even as his thumb works hard to stimulate me. I clench around him, the sensation of his cock driving up into my cervix causing me to come undone.

His grip tightens further, eliciting a gasp from my lips. He moans in response, a sound that vibrates deep in his chest, sending shivers of anticipation down my spine. His fingers dig into the flesh of my hips, anchoring me to him as he moves faster, harder.

“I like that...” I murmur, panting for breath. “I... I’m close, Luke,” I confess, my voice barely a whisper.

He grins, reveling in my neediness. “Then let go,” he growls in response. His thumb increases its pace on my clit, and his other hand snakes its way into my hair, adjusting my head so he can look directly into my eyes. The intimacy of the moment is overwhelming, and I feel tears prick at my eyelashes.

His thumb expertly rubs circles on my clit while his other hand deftly tilts my head back to expose my throat. His lips descend on the column of my neck, nipping and suckling as he continues to thrust into me, driving me to the very edge. “Let go, Micah,” he repeats, his voice a low rumble against my skin.

With a cry that echoes around the bathroom, I shatter, waves of pleasure coursing through me with every thrust of his hips. The sensation is like a wildfire erupting through my veins, consuming me entirely. I shudder and twitch, my body writhing in the throes of climax.

Luke's response is immediate and powerful. He holds me tighter against his chest, his heart beating wildly underneath my fingertips. His lips continue to trace their way down my throat, tongue dashing out to taste the saltiness of sweat on my skin.

"Luke... oh, God, Luke," I pant. Every nerve ending in my body sings with pleasure. Hesitant, yet desperate for more contact, I slide my hand down his chest and grip him where he is driving into me. I feel him shudder beneath my touch, his breath hitching in his throat. His grip in my hair tightens as he thrusts harder, his movements becoming less controlled.

"Micah..." He moans my name like a sacred prayer, his voice filled with raw need and desire. My name on his lips is the sweetest truth, one that echoes deep within my soul.

In that moment, there is no world beyond the steamy confines of the bathroom. It's just us, our beating hearts and ragged breaths echoing in rhythm with the dripping tap, and the relentless pounding of water against porcelain.

Suddenly, Luke stills within me, his body tense. His head drops back onto the edge of the tub, his eyes screwed shut. A deep, guttural groan escapes his lips, and I know he's teetering on the edge. Seeing him so undone stokes the flame of my own pleasure, and I clench around him, intensifying the pressure.

"God... yes!" he growls and quickens his pace once more. His grip tightens on me as he thrusts up one last time, pushing deep inside me. His body jolts, and I feel him quiver beneath me before finally letting out a broken moan as his climax hits him.

He slows his pace gradually, riding out the waves of pleasure that crash over him with each subsequent thrust. His chest heaves with exertion, his heart pounding beneath my hand. I feel his lips against my neck again, placing soft kisses on my skin as his breathing starts to even out.

“Micah...” His voice is soft, the syllables of my name slipping out from between his kiss-swollen lips like a whispered lullaby. It’s an intimate, sacred sound that sends butterflies flitting through my stomach despite the post-orgasmic haze clouding my mind.

I lie across his chest in the water a few more seconds, then slide off him. “I have to find him, Luke.” My hands sweep around the water, finding the wash rag he used to clean me, and I wipe myself clean again. “I’m going back to the computer.”

“Of course. Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it for you.”

He doesn’t try to stop me as I dry off or get dressed in a clean pair of shorts and a T-shirt. And he doesn’t follow me when I head back to the office and my computer. I will find my best friend, and when I do, the people who took him are going to regret the day they took him.

24

LUKE

Micah walks out of the bathroom, but I linger in the tub, thinking of how I can help her. I’m not too foolish to see how my business has affected her life, and up until I met her, none of this even mattered. I lived for myself, for my Family, and for money. But now, there is a reason to live for more than that. For more than just pride and greed.

Micah is the reason.

I sit up, looking down at the mess we've made of this bathroom. When I saw her in her father's arms weeping, I had an overwhelming need to be closer to her, to take away her pain. I was patient while she worked, but I couldn't control that urge a second longer. Now, having connected with her, my mind is clearer. I want what she wants—but I want it in a different way.

As I climb out of the bath and drain the water, scattering towels on the floor to soak up as much of the mess as possible, I think about my enemies. The Russians have now teamed up with the Albanians, who otherwise would be no threat to my empire. They've taken something that should mean nothing to me. I shouldn't be moved by this. I should be resilient and unaffected. My father is probably rolling over in his grave as he looks down on me, but Micah is affected.

If I can't keep the ones I love safe, what sort of a leader am I? Isn't that what family and loyalty are? And it extends to all members of my family, including Micah's loved ones, who are now family because of our marriage. If I'd have taken time to learn this about her, none of this would be happening. And now I'm enraged, both at myself for not understanding this to begin with and with my enemies for crossing me.

She might be able to use her computer skills to see where her friend is or has been in the virtual world, but I will use everything at my disposal to make my enemies pay. And the time of peace that has existed between our families for years is now gone, replaced with bad blood and the seeds of war.

Somewhere in the pile of wet clothing, my phone chirps an incoming call notification. I wrap the towel around my waist tightly and toss the soggy towels aside, thankful my phone has water resistance for up to thirty minutes, and I pick up my pants. My phone, buried in my right front pocket, continues to scream at me until I pull it out and see it's a blocked number.

I swipe right to answer and put it on speakerphone while I dry it off. “Santoro. Who’s this?”

“You know who this is...” The thick Russian accent immediately triggers my rage, and I clench my jaw shut and my hands into fists.

“How did you get this number?” I hiss into the phone, feeling the need to punch something or someone. This scumbag has something to do with Micah’s friend’s disappearance. I know it.

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I move into the bedroom, tearing a pair of slacks and a shirt out of my closet. They have some nerve taking her friend and then calling me to gloat, or threaten me. I don't know yet.

“You’ve been stealing from me, Mr. Santoro, and I don’t take that lightly.” The more this guy speaks, the more familiar his voice becomes. I’m speaking with thePakhanhimself, the man in charge of the entire Russian organization.

I lay my phone down on my dresser as I speak and dress at the same time. If I hurry, it’s possible that Micah can trace this call. “I think you’re mistaken, Mr. Zaslovsky. My business practices are above the table. If you remember correctly, it is your men who are currently awaiting trial for attempted grand larceny.” My fingers work the zipper of my pants as quickly as I can, and I bypass putting socks and shoes on, not even buttoning my pants.

He continues speaking, but I pick up the phone and race downstairs to the office.

“Your wife is quite the talent, isn’t she? It’s very weak of a man like you to keep a woman like that around after she stole from you. Your men must not even respect you at all now. She should be dead. If I get my hands on her, she will be.”

My blood is boiling by the time I get to Micah’s side. She’s busy at work, trying to track her friend, but this way will be faster. I point at the phone as I lay it down next to her and continue my conversation.

“Well, I apologize that you won’t get that opportunity. You see, Mrs. Santoro is quite valuable to me and I care very deeply for her wellbeing. I’ll be keeping her safe.”

Micah looks up at me with wide eyes and nods, then she opens a new browser on her computer and gets to work typing code. I have no clue what she does or how she does it, but watching her work is amazing. I'm in awe of her skill and intelligence.

"I have my own special means. Now, I need to go. I have some business to attend to, but it was nice chatting with you. Oh, and give my regards to that wife of yours. She's a real talent. It'll be a shame for the world to lose someone so gifted."

The line goes dead, and Micah huffs out a sigh. "Fuck!" she grunts, and her fingers keep working overtime.

"What is it? Not enough time?"

She shakes her head. "I have it triangulated down to this area," she says, and a map shows up on the screen next to hers, but she keeps working. "That call came from that twelve-block radius, but if I keep working I can get it down to one or two blocks. Do you think they were calling from the place they have him?"

I straighten and start buttoning my shirt. "If they're smart, no. They'd have a separate safehouse, but it may be close." I don't think for a second that the Pakhan himself is dumb enough to call me from where he's keeping Micah's friend. And for all I know, it isn't even the Russians who have him. It's quite possible it's the Albanians who have him.

But I'll never convince Micah of that. She's so focused on what she's doing, she doesn't even look up when I pick up my phone and walk out. I shoot Vic and Tony a text message, telling them where the hot zone is for the Pakhan. I know they'll check things out for me, and if there is any activity, they'll report in. I just have to keep Micah calm and not let her leave.

"Hey, I need to go out there," she calls, and I turn and walk back into the office,

hovering by the doorway.

“Go where?”

“I need to go search for Will. I can’t sit here doing nothing. I have it down to twelve blocks, Luke.” Her expression is pleading, eyes full of fear.

“I can’t let you go out there.” I move toward her as her gaze clouds with anger. “It’s not safe for you. Didn’t you hear what he said? He wants to kill you, Micah. And he will if you give him the chance.” I don’t understand how she can’t see that. Why she isn’t afraid...

“I don’t care. Someone I care about is out there right now. They have him. I will gladly trade my life to give him his life back.” She rises defiantly, and I glance down at her ankle monitor. That thing won’t keep her here if she’s that determined to leave, and next time, I may not be so lucky as to be able to track or find her.

“You’re staying here. I have men out right now. They’re going to the area you traced that call to. They’ll find him. You just have to keep doing what you’re doing.” I don’t leave any room for argument in my tone, and she glares at me, though I know her feelings aren’t directed at me. She’s as outraged by this as I am, and she wants vengeance as much as I do.

She plops back into her chair and gets back to work, and I shut the door behind me. Mark, who stands near the front door, comes when I beckon him with a gesture. “Stand here, and don’t let her out of your sight. If she leaves this place again, we may not get her back.”

Mark nods at me, and I head up the hallway. I need to be ready for anything, including a chance that I have to go out tonight. So, I go to my den and get my guns ready. If there is a chance we’re going to end up at war, I want to be prepared for

battle. Micah has stirred up a hornets' nest and she did so at my command. Now, it's my job to protect her, and no one is going to stand in my way of doing that.

25

MICAH

This entire day has been a whirlwind. From starting out with the boring software installs and then seeing a glimpse of Will on the dark web, to chasing down a lead, only to learn from his family that he's been missing for weeks—I'm emotional and impulsive. I have to admit the glass of wine in the bath helped, so did sex with Luke, but I can't shake the feeling that something is horribly wrong. If I don't get to him soon, they'll kill him, if for no other reason than his skill can't compare to mine.

I'm not stupid. As I sit here typing away at the keyboard, hunting him down, all I can think about is how men like Luke don't leave loose ends. Will is a liability to them. When they learn he can't do what I can do, they'll off him just to keep their dirty secret silent, and they'll make someone else take his place, maybe someone better than me next time.

"There you are," Luke says as he walks into the office carrying a drink. He also carries my empty wine glass and the bottle is tucked under his arm. "I thought I'd join you and pour you a drink."

"No thanks," I tell him, refocusing on my work. He doesn't know it, but I'm so close to locating the building Will is in. I have it down to now only three blocks of the city, and there are only twelve buildings there. Even if I have to search them all myself, I can find him tonight. I just have to get there. "I can't be drunk if I'm going to find Will."

My hand races over the keyboard, my mind formulating a plan for how I can get out

of this house without being caught. Luke said he's got men out there searching, but they don't know what I know. I may not be some muscled sack of meat who can beat down someone who comes at me, but I am smart and fast. And I get an idea for how to make this all work.

"I am thirsty, though," I tell him, knowing his house staff aren't on duty this evening. He offered me dinner earlier, but I turned him down in favor of working. The kitchen is empty, and so is the pantry where they keep the medications, which is what I'm thinking I may need to step out tonight.

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“I can go get you something,” he offers, but I’m already halfway into the hack.

The cameras were all set up by me and Dale, and he’s such a buffoon, I’m not even sure why Luke hired him. I easily tap right into the feeds, set them on a loop, and start the playback.

“That’s okay. I need to stretch my legs. You stay here and watch this. If something happens, just call me.” I pick up my phone and wave it in the air at him before shoving it into my right pocket. “I’ll get a glass of juice and be right back.”

Luke furrows his brow as he sets the wine bottle and stemware on my desk then sits down in my chair. “Don’t be too long.”

I’m out the door and on my way to the kitchen as fast as I can without drawing suspicion. Luke is already drinking at eight p.m. Most nights, he has his first drink around ten. He says it’s to help him sleep. Tonight, he must either want to sleep early, or he is more stressed. I vote on the former, since he doesn’t seem stressed at all.

In the kitchen, I step into the pantry and quickly search the boxes of medication. He has a few in his medicine cabinet upstairs, but only pain relievers. What I’m looking for is the sleeping tablets I know he has on hand. He offered them to me a few times when I was restless after first marrying him. I dig through the cupboard, trying not to make a mess, and find the half-empty box behind a box of allergy medicine.

“Perfect,” I say, grinning to myself as I see the medication is in tablet form, not capsules. It makes my job easier.

I glance at the clock mounted above the sink, realizing I've already been gone four minutes. I have to make this quick, so I get a small glass of juice and then search for the pestle and mortar I know the cook has in here somewhere. I saw it in the dishwasher one morning when I came down for coffee. But the damn thing evades me, so I resort to taking a fork from the drawer and crushing the tablets on the island. The white powder residue easily wipes up on the palm of my hand as I swipe the crushed pills off the table onto my palm and put the powder into my left pocket.

Feeling a bit less anxious that I'll be caught, I drop the fork into the sink and take my glass of juice back to the office. Luke meets me halfway up the hallway with a scowl on his face, and I hold up my cup of juice. "Couldn't find the glasses," I tell him with a stern smile. If I act too happy, he'll be suspicious, so I sigh and drop my shoulders as I pass him.

He follows me back to my desk where nothing at all is happening, including nothing with the cameras. I have to leave them this way, so I sit on pins and needles praying no one comes or goes while we're here. If Luke realizes the cameras are on a loop, he'll know something is up and he won't let me out of his sight.

Next, I set a new loop to record the pathway from the office to the kitchen, one that doesn't have me on it, and set that to play, then enact part two of my plan. I yawn deep and long and stretch my arms over my head. It causes Luke to take notice and stand behind me with his hands on my shoulders.

"Maybe you should rest. It's been a long day for you." His fingers are magic, finding the tender places on my neck that ache from tension. I don't want him to stop, but I do want my plan to work right. So, I nod and close the windows on my computer and look up at him over my shoulder.

"You're right," I mumble, keeping with the act of sadness and despondency, though my chest is now filling with hope. "Take me to bed?" I ask him, lacing my fingers

through his. I know it's early for him to sleep, but even on nights when he sits up drinking while I retire early, he always holds me for a few minutes.

"Of course I will," he says as I stand.

Luke escorts me toward our room, his drink in hand. There is just enough there to mix the crushed pills with so long as he doesn't indulge before we get to the room, so I keep him talking.

"You think we'll find him? I'm really worried." I lean on him, resting my head on his shoulder, and he puts his arm around me.

"We won't stop until we do."

I keep an eye on this whiskey glass every step of the way. "You said your men are out searching?" I wonder which men he has out there. Vic is here, Tony too. Dale is worthless, only a tech guy, and Chris has to keep the casino running smoothly. He has more men than I've met, but I don't trust any of them. I need to do it myself.

"They are," he says, nodding, and we turn into our bedroom.

Now comes the tricky part. I have to get this medication into his drink and let it dissolve before he drinks the rest, and he'll want to watch me undress. My hands shake as I pull the T-shirt up over my head, then shimmy my jeans down to the floor, careful not to let any of the powder spill. When he sets his drink on his nightstand, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'll be right back." Luke kisses my forehead before heading to the bathroom. And though he leaves the door open while he takes a piss, I have just enough time and boldness to do the deed.

I snatch my jeans and carefully turn the left pocket out, dumping the ground-up tablets into my hand. Then I crawl across the bed and drop the powder into his whiskey, using my finger to stir it. I'm tempted to lick my finger clean, but I stop myself. I can't afford to let anything even so much as delay me from my task, and I'm in the middle of folding the covers back as Luke reappears in the room.

"Have I ever told you how incredibly sexy you are?" he asks, coming up behind me and grabbing my hips.

I'm on all fours on the bed, and he stands beside it, the perfect height to take me from behind, but I have to focus. His hands smooth across my skin, sliding beneath the silky fabric of my panties as he bends over my torso and kisses the sensitive spot between my shoulder blades.

"Not tonight," I tell him. It's the only time I've ever rejected his physical advances, and I don't even feel guilty for doing it. If he gets his heart rate up, the pills will take longer to kick in.

"I understand, mia cara, but tomorrow, you're mine." He smacks my ass hard and then rounds the end of the bed as I lie down and pull the covers over my body. I'm still wearing my bra, which isn't normal, but he says nothing about it as he climbs into bed still fully clothed. Tonight is a night he'd most likely hold me for a short time then go back to his office, but for my plan to work, he has to stay here.

"Hold me?" I ask, snuggling closer to him until my body splays along the length of his. He lies down, but first he drinks the whiskey, every last drop of it. And when his body curls around mine, warming me, I breathe him in deeply. When he wakes up and realizes what I've done, I know I'll have a punishment so severe our relationship, tender and budding as it is, won't survive.

I'll never be able to think of him the same way if he hurts me. And he'll never trust

me again. But Will is too important to me to do nothing and trust that Luke will keep his word. He's a criminal, and a mastermind at that. I'm foolish to think he will ever be anything other than that. I have to keep his occupation in mind when my heart starts to feel attached to him.

"We're going to stop the Russians in their tracks. I'm going to get your friend back for you." His kisses on my forehead are precious treasures I cherish, but my heart is weighed down by heavy emotions. I'm angry with him for not doing more, but now I see that he does at least care enough to try.

"Will deserves to have someone fight for him. He got dragged into this when he was innocent of it all." I splay my hand on his chest and feel his heart beating beneath my fingertips. The steady thrum of his pulse comforts me. It might be the last time I'm able to lie here with him for a while, or the last time ever if his enemies catch me. But I'm not afraid.

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“I’m doing this for you, Micah. You deserve someone to do this for you.” His fingers curl the hair around my ear and he yawns. “I think maybe I’ll just go to bed early with you too.”

I don’t think it’s been long enough for the sleeping pills to kick in, so my earlier assumption of how early he’d had his first drink may be correct. I reach up and kiss him softly on the lips, then turn over and let him pull me into his chest.

“What if we don’t find him?” I ask, but I know it’s not an option. I can’t let them hurt him. I can’t let his family suffer like that. I know the pain of losing someone you love. His mother doesn’t deserve that.

“We’ll find him,” Luke mumbles, and I feel him relaxing deeply. His breathing is heavy, his arm heavier on my side.

He didn’t take dinner either, and I don’t know how much he had to drink before he came to the office. I glance at the red lights on the alarm clock on my nightstand and see it’s been thirty minutes now, definitely long enough to feel some effects. And when he begins snoring lightly, I know it’s time to go.

I know he’s trying, and I am thankful for that, but I have to steel myself against my own affection for him. If I listen to my foolish heart, I’ll climb back into that bed and go to sleep and lose my chance to find Will.

As quietly as I can, I pull my T-shirt back on, shove my legs into the jeans, and dig out a pair of socks. Luke stirs slightly as I open the closet door to get my boots, but his snoring relaxes back into its steady rhythm soon, and I slip out and down the

hallway.

Back in the office, I log back into my computer and begin hacking again. The last time I did this, I set the alarm off before I was able to disable the ankle monitor. Tonight, I won't be so hasty. I'm meticulous as I work my way through the code, ignoring everything else. The cameras are still on loop. Luke is out cold now, and only Vic by the front door stands in my way—easily remedied by sneaking out the window instead.

When I get to the crucial part of disarming the monitor, I do it right this time. The red flashing light turns off and the monitor shuts down. My heart pounds in my chest and my hands shake as I remove the monitor and lay it on the desk. I think of scrawling a note for him, but there's no point. When he wakes up, he'll know where I've gone and why.

I fold my laptop shut, tuck it into a backpack I took from the bedroom before heading downstairs, and move toward the window. I glance back at the door to the office, thinking how upset Luke will be and how sad that makes me, but this is for Will, and I can't turn back.

Then I open the window, slip out into the night, and run northward. I'll hail a cab and be there in twenty minutes. Then I just have to find him and pray Luke's enemies don't catch me first.

26

LUKE

My bladder screams for relief, waking me somewhere around the wee hours of the morning. I lie here feeling lethargic and overly tired, knowing it isn't late enough for me to be awake yet but not knowing what time it is yet. My body is still far too tired

to get out of bed for the day, but my body won't let me lie here sleeping until I use the toilet.

The floor is cold when my feet touch it, but I traipse into the bathroom and the blinding light. I must've left the light on when I was in here before I went to bed, and it hurts my eyes, so I flip the switch to off and put the lid of the toilet up to relieve myself. My head spins a little, still feeling the effects of my drinks. They hit me harder than I thought they would last night, though I didn't eat much more than a bite or two of dinner. Seeing Micah struggle to handle her emotions over this whole thing with her friend made me feel like I should abstain from eating for moral support.

When I'm done with the toilet, I wash my hands and dry them, then return to the bedroom. My eyes are a bit stunted by the light so I can't see clearly, but I feel my way along the foot of the bed to my side. I crawl in, expecting to curl up around my beautiful wife and draw comfort from her body, but her side of the bed is empty and cold. Her phone isn't on the nightstand like normal, and I'm alone.

I'm not alarmed, though. If she'd have left the property, the ankle monitor would have told me, so she must be downstairs at her computer working again. For a moment, I lie in bed watching the alarm clock go in and out of focus with my sleep-deprived eyes. I've watched my mother mourn my father's loss over the past several months, and I see the same grief in Micah's expression every time I look at her. I can tell she loves this guy even if he is just a friend. I know there is nothing my mother wouldn't do to bring Dad back. And likewise, Micah is just as reckless, but I hate watching her struggle. It reminds me of the futility of life, how we're all vulnerable, and that vulnerability doesn't sit well with me.

I force myself out of bed and strip off my uncomfortable clothing, exchanging it for a pair of sweatpants, a fresh long-sleeved T-shirt, and a pair of slippers. If Micah is going to burn the midnight oil at her computer, I'm going to join her. She shouldn't be alone, and now that I'm awake and unable to get back to sleep, I don't want to just

lie in bed.

I descend the stairs and turn toward the office, seeing the light streaming out the open door. Vic sits next to the front door, leaning against it. His head is lolled back and to the side, deep, rumbling snores emanating from his gaping mouth. I don't mind that he's resting because I know if something happens, he'll wake ready for action.

When I approach the office, I expect to hear Micah's fingers on the keys, pecking away, but I hear tapping instead. The rhythmic, steady tap of water, only it's not rain on the window, but on the leaves of the bushes outside the front of my house. I round the corner, and the first thing I see is the open window where the wind blows the raindrops in, puddling on the floor. The curtain blows in the breeze, and I turn toward Micah's desk, but she isn't there.

The hair on my arms rises and I rush to her spot. Her computer is gone. Her ankle monitor isn't on her leg. It's on her desk, and she hasn't even left a note.

"Fuck!" I shout, slamming my fist onto her desk, and Vic runs in, rubbing his eyes.

"What's wrong!"

"She's gone," I shout, rushing over to the window. Who knows when she left or how far she's gotten. I lean out the window and look into the stormy darkness, and a clap of thunder echoes my emotion. "Get the guys, and call the team out searching. Let them know we're searching for her too."

When I turn to face him, he's already sending texts out on his phone. I charge back over and pat my hips as I do. My phone is up on my nightstand where I left it next to my drink, plugged in for the night. I race back up to the room and flip on the light, and while I'm shedding the sweats I just put on, I dial Dale's number.

“Yeah, what?” he grumbles. It’s nearly three a.m. No doubt, he was sleeping.

“Wake up. Get over here,” I growl and stumble as I hastily try to put my feet into the legs of my slacks. “Micah took off. I need you to help me track her.”

“Yeah, okay...” Dale sounds as irritated by this as I am, but I don’t get a chance to say a thing about his attitude. He hangs up, and I jam my feet into my shoes, grab a shirt and my phone, and head back downstairs. My head is throbbing now, an instant headache brought on by lack of sleep, stress, and a bit too much to drink last night. I head for the kitchen and something to drink, and perhaps some pain medication too.

And when I step into the pantry to find the ibuprofen, I see why I slept so hard. The package of sleeping tablets lies on its side next to the allergy medicine, not behind it where I last put it. I flip on the lights in the kitchen as I take a few pills out of the bottle of pain meds and see a trace amount of white powder on the island.

When I grab a cup from the cupboard near the sink, I see a fork with more white powder on it. Micah crushed a sleeping tablet or two and put them in my drink. She had to have. It’s the only way she could have gotten me sleeping so early. And it’s likely the reason she took so long when she got her juice last night, which I now recall she never took a sip of.

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How could I be so stupid?

Once I've downed the pills and chased them with a large glass of water, I head back to the office. I can at least check the cameras to see when she left. I sit down in front of Dale's computer and log in the way he taught me, but there are no notifications from the camera at all. I glance up at Vic and scowl.

"When did you bring that chair to the front door and sit down and fall asleep?" I glare at him angrily, and he squirms.

"Uh, sorry, sir. I got kinda tired and I?—"

"What time!" My interruption sobers him. I don't give a single fuck when he fell asleep. I need to know when he moved up the hallway.

"Around one, sir. I took the chair from the living room and put it there and sat down. I fell asleep shortly after." Vic pockets his phone and stands with shoulders squared, ready to answer for his stupidity, but I'm not interested in reprimanding him right now.

"And what time did Micah come into the office?" Rage boils my blood. She set the cameras to a loop again, the way she did the last time she tried to sneak out and we caught her. There is no footage from one a.m. when Vic said he moved the chair.

"Uh, before nine p.m., sir. She didn't say a word to me. She just walked in and sat down at her computer." Vic looks terrified, and he should be. He let her climb right out the window and head off down the street alone in the middle of the night with my

enemies hunting for her.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” My shoulders tense, and I am about to rip his head off when Dale bursts in, drenched from the rain and carrying his computer bag.

“I brought backup,” he says, nodding over his shoulder. An older man in his fifties follows behind, removing his dripping hat. I don’t even care who comes to help as long as we find her before the Russians do.

“She put a set of coordinates out for us, a twelve-block radius we need to start with. We can narrow down the search by eliminating anything that closed earlier this evening and anything that is a very public place. Get on this, guys. We have to find her now.”

I watch them start setting up shop, and all I can do is pace. I’m helpless to do anything else. Unless I have a direction to go, I can’t even get in my car and go. And a new emotion is rising, one I’ve never felt... or haven’t felt since I was a child.

Genuine terror. They’re going to kill her, and not in a nice way, either. They’ll make an example of her, killing her very publicly, and probably torture her first. And this is all my fault.

Why the fuck couldn’t she just listen to me?

27

MICAH

I glance at the clock again, noting it’s now after three a.m. Four hours of hacking, set up in this damn Ramen shop in midtown, and I’ve still gotten nowhere. My eyes are tired. I’ve drunk two energy drinks and just cracked the third open, and all I can do is

keep trying. Every attempt I make at breaking down their firewall is thwarted by their own hacker, probably keeping me from seeing what Will is doing. I know he's close. It's like I can feel his presence with me, like he's there in the keys, on the screen, coaxing me forward.

"Come on, come on!" I scold myself as the petite cashier with dark hair passes by my table again. She eyes me suspiciously, the way she has all ten times she's passed the table tonight. I'm a paying customer, but I get the feeling that if I don't order something more soon, she'll ask me to leave. No one else is here. She probably wants to nap or something.

I force a smile at her, and she scowls and walks off. Then I refocus on the task of hacking the Russian network again. I'm right between two of the buildings that are likely my target. The small Ramen shop sits between them, in the ground floor of an mid-rise apartment building. It's dirty and it smells like old fish, but it's the only place with a light still on this time of night and free Wi-Fi.

Will would call the place a dive and refuse to eat here, but I'm playing hero, not ordering a gourmet meal. And he will thank me when I figure out which building he's in and rescue him. At least, I hope he will. Which is why I keep pushing myself even though I desperately need sleep. My shoulders are slumped. I hunch over my screen, and then I hear the bell above the door chime.

I try to keep my eyes on the computer screen, but movement out of the corner of my eye startles me. Without drawing attention to myself, I glance up at the activity to see a large man with dark hair, dressed in all black, stalking toward me. My throat seizes as I try to stifle a whimper, and I shut the laptop, effectively locking it. He is staring right at me, and I only have seconds to react.

My heart races as I slip my laptop off the table and into the backpack I stole from Luke's house. I am on my feet racing toward the door as I struggle into the straps of

the backpack and try to keep as many of the small round tables between myself and that man as possible. His eyes track me, and he smirks, revealing his tobacco-stained teeth in a crooked grin.

They've found me. I wasn't careful enough in my hacking, and without the backup of a partner to cover my tracks and the speed of the supercomputer at Luke's place, I knew I was just too vulnerable. But I couldn't stop, and now I can't do anything but run. My feet clomp on the tile floor of the Ramen shop all the way to the door, which I reach before him. I thrust it open and dart into the night, then turn to run up the sidewalk, but there are more of them. A lot of them.

At least ten grown men surround me, all of them with menacing expressions, a few of them with weapons in hand. "Shit," I hiss, and turn to retreat, but the man is there, just out of the restaurant, and a few more men have joined him, closing me in from the backside.

"What do you want!" I shout, but the way my voice cracks and shakes gives away my fear.

"You're coming with us, Ms. DeSantis." One of them speaks, and it makes my blood run cold. The hair on my arms stands on end, and I whine as my eyes dart around, looking for a way through them or away from them, but before my feet can move, one of them grabs my backpack and rips it off my shoulders.

"Hey, ouch!" I snap, spinning around to grab the thing back, but there are too many of them, all of them too large to even take on one-on-one. Terror grips me, and I realize instantly that Luke was right. This is too dangerous. I should have listened. I need to get out of here, and the only way out is through, so I charge forward, barreling into the herd of men, only to be grabbed and hoisted onto someone's shoulder where I kick and scream and pound my fists.

Luke's words of warning ring out all too true now. They'll kill me. They're probably taking me somewhere to do just that right now. "Let me go!" I scream, kicking so hard I catch one of them in the jaw, and he stumbles backward. Another one smacks me hard across the face, and I taste blood in my mouth.

"Shut up, you little bitch," he says, but I don't stop screaming and pounding my hands into the back of the man who has me over his shoulder. Someone somewhere might see what they're doing and call the cops. Maybe the cashier at the Ramen shop, but I don't hear sirens even as they walk up the street.

The mob enters a building, and now I know no one from the street will hear me anymore. I devolve into sobs that rack my body and claw at the man's skin until his back is bleeding, but he doesn't let me go. He keeps walking through a maze of hallways and rooms until he drops me on the floor in a heap. My head slams back into something hard, and I see stars for a moment, and then I see the thing I've been missing for months. Will.

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He stands over me with a worried expression and a hand outstretched in my direction. “Oh, my God,” I gasp, taking his hand. He pulls me up, and I throw my arms around his shoulders and let all my emotion unleash on him. “I thought you were dead. What happened? Where are we?”

Will’s arms lock around my waist tightly and his chin digs into my shoulder, but he hardly speaks. “Shh, please,” he whispers... “Tell my mom I love her. Tell her I’ll be waiting for her.”

Confused, I pull back from him and look him in the eye. “No, I won’t. You’ll tell her yourself. What do you mean?” My eyes are solely focused on him, but there are other people in this room too—the men who took me and others. Will looks terrified, white as a ghost. His lips are chapped and bleeding. His right eye is blackened. His hair is greasy as if he hasn’t showered or eaten in days, and all I want to do is get him out of here.

“Just do what they say, Micah...” With a very intense stare, he backs away from me, and I try to reach for him as one of the black-clad men pulls him hard and shoves him to the ground.

“No, Will!” I dive at him, but someone catches me around the waist and prevents me from going to him again.

Then a resounding boom fills the air, shattering my heart and sending blood to the floor and wall behind my best friend. I’m temporarily deafened by the blast, a gunshot from the gun in the hand of one of the men standing in front of me. The dark crimson stain begins to spread on Will’s chest as he gasps for breath, then pools under him

and grows larger by the second.

“Will! No!” I scream again, clawing at the arm holding me, but the man doesn’t let me go. His sinister laugh enrages me and brings more tears. I can’t stop the bleeding. Will is dying right in front of my eyes. “Why? Why did you do that! You can let him go,” I cry, pleading for his release, but even I know it’s too late.

“Sit at the table now,” an older man says.

I’m crying so hard I can’t breathe or see straight. My hands are trembling, knees are weak, but the man lets me go and all I do is stand here. Will’s eyes shut, his breathing stops, and his head falls to the side. I cover my mouth and sob into it. This is all my fault. I did this to him by hacking Luke. Will should never have been involved in this.

“Sit!” the older man shouts again, making me jump, and the man with the gun points his weapon at me.

I stumble to the chair, still crying hysterically, and someone turns me toward a computer, away from the mess on the floor behind me. I’ve seen a computer like this before. The readout and the code, it’s all normal. It’s all easy for me, but I’m in shock and I can’t even make out a single character on the screen.

“Now, you’ve stolen my money and you’re going to return it.” My eyes trace up to the voice attached to those words, and I see a man much older than myself. He’s the type of man I expected Luke to be when I heard he took over the Santoro family. White hair covers his head and rims his eyes. Wrinkles stretch across his severe face, and his hand shakes as he points at the computerscreen, but it’s not from fear the way my hand shakes. This guy is so old he is shaky. He has to be the Russian leader, and he’s come to punish me himself.

“What?” I ask, sucking in stuttered breaths between sobs.

He reaches out and grips my chin, forcing me to look up at his eyes. “Your friend knew his death was coming. It’s why he said goodbye to you. Now you must know your end is coming next, after I get my money. But make no mistake, if you dawdle and don’t give me what I want immediately, you’ll die anyway. You took my money, and I want it back.”

He releases my chin, and my head snaps to the side. I curl inward, hugging myself and leaning over the computer to sob harder. “You have fifteen minutes,” he says, and then the room empties. All the men follow him out, leaving only me alone in this bare gray room with one table and one computer and one dead body.

I’m cold, shaking so badly from shock that I think I may pass out, but I’m alive, for now. I slip off the seat and crawl to Will’s body, sobbing harder and harder by the second. “Oh, my God, Will, I’m so sorry.” I pick up his hand and press my lips to it, then hold it against my forehead. “It’s all my fault. I’m so sorry,” I wail again and again.

I think of his mother and how devastated she’ll be. I think of Will and how he had his whole life ahead of him and now he’s gone. And I think of my father and how terrified he’ll be when he hears Will is dead.

Then I think of myself and what is going to happen to me when they come back. Because they’re coming back, and they’re not messing around. I knew better than to do what I did with Luke’s money to begin with, but I never thought it would come to this.

As I try to stand, I realize my pants are soaked. I’m so terrified I pissed myself at some point, though I don’t even know when, and now I have to deal with that on top of trying to process my friend’s murder which I witnessed. All while trying to hack Luke’s accounts to take the Russians’ money back.

Oh, God, if there is a God, I need you. Send Luke...

28

LUKE

Things are heating up. Dale and his friend have gotten into the Russians' system and tried to find Will, but more importantly, they mirrored her computer too and they know she's at a Ramen shop within the twelve-block radius she told us to search.

My heart races as Vic speeds down the familiar streets, his hands gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles. The two hackers sit in the back seat, their eyes darting around nervously. I cling to the handle above the passenger door, praying we make it in time. We have to reach her before they do—the ruthless Pakhan and his men—or she'll be dead for sure. I can feel my chest tightening at the thought of losing her. We stole from the wrong people, and now their vengeance is upon us. I'd do anything to protect her, even give back all the money we took. But that won't matter if they find her first.

Dale's voice trembles as he reports, "Her computer crashed five minutes ago, sir. I can hear the frantic clicking of his laptop keys as he tries to regain control. "But thank goodness, we have secured the building."

I glance behind me to see his face, contorted with a mix of anger and intense concentration. The blue light from his computer screen casts harsh shadows under his tired eyes, giving him an eerie ghost-like appearance. His friend's expression is less severe but still holds the weight of determination. But neither of these men know the consequences they'll face if they fail me—a punishment that will be swift and severe.

The older man's eyes flick back and forth across the screen in front of him, his fingers tapping rapidly on the keyboard. His brow furrows as he studies the code, searching

for any sign of movement. Finally, he looks up and says, "She's in a warehouse two buildings up from the Ramen shop." A faint hint of admiration creeps into his voice as he adds, "She's a smart cookie. Damn, she's good." The tension in the car rises as he focuses on the screen, waiting for the next move in this high-stakes game of cat and mouse.

"What do you mean?" I ask, craning my neck to look back at Vic. The wind pushes the car around and the trees blur past us, a symphony of green and brown streaks against the city skyline. The rain makes our trek slick, but Vic's gaze is fixed ahead, his expression set with determination as if we were sprinting toward a finish line rather than simply racing against time. His hands grip the steering wheel tightly, knuckles turning white from the pressure. In this moment, he is like a man possessed, driving with a fierce urgency that matches the pounding of my heart in my chest.

"I mean, she's purposefully leading us to her location. She's been siphoning small amounts of money from your accounts, leaving a trail we can easily follow. And to top it off, she has left so many digital breadcrumbs that you'd think she was baking a goddamn cake." His tone is tinged with disbelief as he lays out the evidence against Micah. I don't care what she's doing. I just want her back.

I find myself drawn to this mature man. His demeanor exudes wisdom and experience, unlike Dale, who seems content with staying in ignorance. If it were up to Dale, we would still be fumbling about in the dark, but this man offers a guiding light, shedding knowledge and insight onto our path.

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“Go,” I shout over the roar of the engine, and Vic hits the gas pedal without hesitation. The car lurches forward, racing through red lights and zipping through busy intersections. Horns blare and tires squeal as we narrowly avoid collisions, leaving chaos in our wake. But those minor accidents can easily be swept under the rug with a little help from our friend on the force. What they can't do is reverse death, once a spirit has left its earthly vessel. It's like trying to catch smoke with bare hands—impossible and futile.

Skeptical and wary, Vic's head shakes back and forth as he surveys the surroundings. We're getting closer to our target, just a few blocks away now, but his words are a stark reminder that this mission won't be easy. "They'll have men, sir. Lots of them. If this is their safehouse, there's no way they'll let us just walk right in there." His voice is low, but the anger and tension are palpable. A chill runs down my spine as I realize he's right—we'll need backup if we want to have any chance of success.

I reach for my phone and dial Mark's number, and he picks up on the second ring. "I'm here, go."

"Mark, we need immediate reinforcements at the address I'm sending you right now." I pull my phone away from my ear, the urgency in my voice matching the pounding of my heart. With shaky fingers, I quickly send the coordinates that Dale just forwarded to me and put the phone back to my ear. "Bring everything you have. Come heavily armed. We're up against powerful resistance and we need all the firepower we can get. Our priority is getting her out safely." The gravity of the situation weighs heavily on my mind as I wait for Mark's response, knowing that every second counts.

“Got it, sir. We’re on the way.” Mark hangs up the phone, and I quickly stow mine in my pocket. My hand instinctively reaches for my weapon, cool metal meeting my palm as I prepare for what's to come. The weight of it grounds me, reminding me of my duty and the gravity of the situation at hand. Time is of the essence, and we must move swiftly.

Despite the urgency of our situation, I can't help but feel a surge of pride at how quickly Dale and his friend have adapted to our line of work. They may not have had any formal training, but their instincts and determination make up for it. The fact that they're both willing to put themselves in harm's way for this mission speaks volumes. But knowing that they've never fired a weapon before makes me realize just how dangerous this could be.

"We aren't going to have the luxury of time to wait for backup to come," I say, my voice filled with urgency. "Though I can delay a few minutes to give them a chance to get here before we're all dead." My mind races as I try to come up with a plan that will keep us alive long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

I turn over my shoulder again and ask, "Have you two ever fired a weapon?"

Dale looks at me like he's in shock and the old man's face goes pale. "No, sir, never," Dale stammers out.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," I say, trying to remain calm despite the chaos around us. "I'll take the lead and provide cover fire while you two stick close behind me. When we get inside, stay low and follow my lead."

I reach for the glovebox and take out Vic's extra gun, handing it to Dale. Then I reach into my boot and take my spare. It goes to the old man whose name I don't even know, but who I hope survives this. He has a new job if he wants it.

The men look back at me with ghostly expressions and pale flesh. Neither of them has seen action like this, but together with Vic, they're my backup for now.

"Are you ready?" I ask, chambering a round. The men follow suit as Vic rolls the car to a stop and puts it in park.

"No," Dale mutters, but the old man nods at me firmly, and that's all the consent I need. "Let's go." I open the car door and step into the rain. It's time to get my wife back, and I'm taking no prisoners.

29

MICAH

Only a few minutes pass as I sit on the floor cradling Will's hand. He's still warm, but I know he's gone. No one can survive a bullet to the chest like this without emergency medical care, and these monsters aren't calling an ambulance. My heart hurts for him, and even though I know I should be doing what they say, I can't help but stay here with my friend's lifeless body.

Until I hear footsteps pounding the floor and approaching the door. I scramble to my feet, swiping away the tears on my cheeks, and plop behind the computer they've left in here with me. For a moment, I'm not sure why they think I can do anything at all. This thing isn't connected to a network. But when I hear a key in the door lock, I also notice that the computer gains a signal, so I get to work.

These people are good, better than me, maybe, and I have to be super careful. But as I work, I decide there is a way I can alert Luke to what's going on. I may not be able to set off the alarm on the cuff at the house, but I can leave a trail so obvious to Dale that he will see it, even if he doesn't see it until Luke wakes up later in the morning and finds out I'm gone. I know he'll call the computer guy and try to track me.

So, I dig into the hack and work as fast as I can. Then men come in, armed and angry, and sit down around the table with me. It doesn't bother them that there is a dead man on the floor, at least not for a short time. I sniffle and blink back more tears to hide my emotion because it also doesn't bother them that I'm in shock and only trying to survive.

One of them sits with a computer too, also typing furiously. I assume he is the one who was opposing me at every turn and keeping me from seeing what Will was doing. If that's the case, then he will be the one to throw the red flag up if he catches what I'm doing—siphoning only small amounts out of each of Luke's accounts with very obvious breadcrumbs for Dale to find and track.

"Your friend was an imbecile," the hacker says, and I look up at him. He has a scar that runs from above his eyebrow to the middle of his cheek, right across his left eye. It looks like he took a severe beating at some point too, his aquiline nose so crooked it resembles a Picasso.

"Do you always talk about the dead like that?" I glare at him, but my fingers keep moving, working the keys. I don't know how long they expect my work for them to take, but I could have already emptied all of Luke's accounts, and half of New York City, for that matter. They haven't given me a timeline other than that old man's warning of fifteen minutes.

"I'll talk about you like that in a few minutes, bitch. Get to work." The man across from me—the one with the gun—isn't a conversationalist. Based on the way he rolls his eyes at me as he uses the hem of his T-shirt to polish his carbon-fiber gun, I'd say he's just the muscle and probably not very intelligent at all.

I'm in the Santoro system now too, moving money, leaving the trail for Dale, and I see him there. He's communicating with me in a series of binary codes. It hurts my brain and my eyes to stare at the string of numbers, but I force myself to focus on it

and decipher what he's saying. I only get a split second, though, because meathead over there is covering my tracks and erasing Dale's messages faster than I can read them.

"Your friends are trying to speak to you, suka... Not a good idea. It will end up with you on the ground next to William." The man with the scar glances down at Will, and I almost jump up to slap his gaze away. He doesn't even deserve to be in the same room with Will, let alone look at him. They did this to him, and somehow, I'm going to make them pay for it.

"I wouldn't exactly call them my friends." I think of Luke and his staff. Dale and I hardly talked while I worked, what with his video game obsession, and the other men are just security, not exactly friend material to someone like me. But Luke is more than a friend. There's something there between us even when I don't want there to be.

I know it because of the way he hovered over me when I got really afraid of this exact thing—Will being harmed. I don't think for a second that Luke was just sitting and watching me work because he thought I was a flight risk. He sat there because he was worried about me, and he wanted me to know that.

I wonder what he's thinking now, where he's at? I glance at the time on the computer screen and see it's creeping past four a.m. now. Is Luke awake yet? Or is he still sleeping peacefully, drugged by my hand so I could escape to come after Will? I've done this to myself, and I hate myself for it. Luke told me he was going to make sure Will was safe, but maybe I'm the reason he's dead now.

Tears burn my eyes again, threatening to spill over once more as I feel the weight of guilt pound on my back. If Luke had come searching, maybe they wouldn't have killed Will. They needed him alive to do the hacking, but with me now, they have what they need, and he became expendable.

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“Why did you have to kill him?” I whimper, but it’s so low they don’t hear me, or if they do, they ignore my question. Sobs come, and I don’t stop them. I let the tears drop on the keyboard as I continue “working” for them. I transfer money from Luke’s account, then from the Albanians. Then I switch and with as many account numbers as I can reliably recall, I continue siphoning money. I won’t bankrupt Luke, but I have to make it look good.

Then I begin to shiver, the shock of the whole situation finally settling in. My hands shake, making it almost impossible to type well. It slows my pace to a crawl, and I see the scarred man nod at the other. He stands and walks out, leaving only me with the hacker. I don’t know where he went until I hear a ruckus out there, loud noises and crashes. Then the obvious sound of gunfire.

I sit up straight and look at the door—closed but not locked. More fear invades my mind, pinching my chest so that it hurts. I feel like the walls are closing in on me, like it would be better for me to dip my fingers in Will’s blood and smear it on my body and lie down to pretend I’m dead. Maybe it would be my salvation. But no one would believe that if I do it in front of the hacker.

My pulse soars, thrumming past my eardrums at a deafening pace. My body feels stiff, aching with each jolt of shivers that racks my form. The hacker stands up and closes his laptop, tucking it under an arm, and walks to the door.

“Get to work,” he growls as he steps out and shuts the door behind him, but I can’t work now. Luke is here. I know it in my gut. There is no reason for a fire fight otherwise.

I stand and creep to the door to listen, pressing my ear against the cold metal, and I hear shouting in the distance. I don't know if I should run or hide, and if Luke dies, there will be no one left to help me. I glance at Will and blink out more tears before wiping them away with my sleeve.

"I'll come back for you, buddy," I whisper to him, then I pull the door open. I don't have a gun, but I'm smart. Hopefully, that counts for something.

I step into the hallway and move toward the sound of gunshots, praying this isn't a mistake.

30

LUKE

I move toward the building with boldness and determination. Vic walks to my left, readying his gun, and Dale's friend is at my right side, already prepared. Dale trails behind, ready to cover our backs and be the first to the car to drive when we run out with Micah.

"Shoot first, ask questions later. We each have fourteen rounds and one in the chamber. That's all we're getting, guys, so make the shots count." My chest is so tight, I feel like I'll have a heart attack. I never feel like this when entering a fight, but this time, it's different. This time, it's personal.

"We have company," Vic says, turning and moving into the darkness to the left of the building at top speed. I hear a few rounds rip off, shattering the otherwise pallid night with a hint of spark at the tip of his gun's barrel.

"Go to the door," I order my newfound soldier, and he obeys my order, running up and throwing the door open.

I enter first, gun pointed down the long hallway. We rush past a few rooms that are all empty before a few men duck out of yet another room up the hall. I take them by surprise, popping off a few rounds into their chests before they even have a chance to react. Unfortunately, it alerts the rest of the building to our presence, and now we have to move more quickly.

“Shit, go now!” I hiss, and my men rush toward them, stripping their weapons. I watch Vic, who has now joined us inside, put one of the weapons in his waistband, then hand me the other.

I jam it into my boot as I nod at a juncture where the hallway turns. He moves forward, nodding for Dale to come with him, and I hear a lot of shouting. Pressing myself against the wall, I inch my way down the darker hallway, checking each room as I go. The rooms are all void of humans, but it looks like they conduct business here. Each room has a desk, a computer, and a few chairs, and they all look the same.

Dale’s friend follows behind me, checking the rooms on the opposite side of the hallway, and when he opens one that’s occupied, he gets a shock. One of the Russians lets a shot go, catching the man in his shoulder. He falls to the ground wounded, and I fire back, hitting the Russian in the temple. It’s lights out for him, but it draws attention I don’t want.

“Fuck, I’m hit,” the older man grumbles, and I have to step over him to continue firing up the hall at more of our enemies coming closer. A few of them drop, and a few more duck into offices down the hall.

“Can you still drive?” I ask him, and he grunts as he drags himself into the office where I stand, watching up the hallway.

“I think so...”

“Good, I’ll lay cover fire. You get out. Go to the car and keep it running.”

I wait for him to get to his feet and shove the extra weapon into his waistband just in case, and when I step into the hallway and fire off a few rounds, I shout, “Go now!”

The man darts back down the hallway from where we came while I advance a few yards up the hall, ducking into yet another office.

I still hear Vic and Dale shooting, along with dozens of other guns reporting in the building. It’s likely to be nothing but a bloodbath, and I pray that Micah isn’t one of the casualties. I’ll never forgive myself.

“Where’s she at!” I scream, anger clouding my judgment. They’ll never give her up, and though it has to be obvious why we’re here, they don’t need me to egg them on.

Laughter booms out of the office only two doors down, then a thick Russian voice calls out, “She’s already dead, Santoro. Go home before you join her.”

His comment only makes my temper worse. I don’t even care if I’m taking my life into my own hands. I lunge into the hallway firing haphazardly until I see a head pop out and I blast it. The bullet slams into the man’s forehead, laying him out to the ground in a puddle of his own blood, which is also splattered down the length of the hall. There are seven or eight more doors on each side, and I’m almost out of bullets. There’s no way I can clear them all myself.

“Give up, I have reinforcements coming.” I duck into the next room from where my most recent kill walked into the hallway. I know across the hall and down one door is where the last man is hiding. There may be more men up the hall still, but Micah may also be in one of those rooms. “Let her go now.”

The laughter is maniacal, eerie and seeming to come from more than one room at a

time. I lean into the hallway and hear gunshots blast past my head, which makes me quickly duck back inside the room and lean against the wall.

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“You’re going to die today, Santoro. You should have stayed home and let us deal with her ourselves. We know you married her and forced her to do your dirty work. It’s not personal, just business.”

If I see this man’s face, I’ll gut him from sternum to pubic bone. Not personal? That’s all this is. There is nothing more personal than taking a man’s wife and threatening to kill her.

I dart back into the hallway and keep my gun on aim, this time conserving my ammunition. By my count, I have three rounds left. I don’t stand much of a chance against this guy with no gun, but I don’t have time to rush back up the hall and take a gun off one of the dead men, besides the fact that if I did, that would leave my back exposed.

I take a deep breath and my mind begins to race. I calculate my odds, trying to form any possible strategy that could get me out of this predicament alive. My fingers tighten around the grip of my gun, the cold metal like ice in my hand.

The laughter echoes again, louder this time. It’s a sick, twisted sound, devoid of any humanity. The chilling noise reverberates off the hallway walls, heightening the tension. I grit my teeth against it, barely suppressing the primal urge within me to charge headlong into the fight. But that would be suicide.

My wife’s face flashes before my eyes, our last moments together a stark reminder of what I’m fighting for. I can still feel the softness of her skin, see the love in her eyes. That’s my drivingforce. I won’t let these monsters take that away from me. I inch forward in the hallway and ready myself to take a shot as I feel the hard steel of a

weapon press into the back of my head.

"Drop the gun," the grizzly voice says, and I obey. I'm no good to Micah if I'm dead. "Nice and easy," he continues, keeping his position firm and unmoving. "No sudden movements, Santoro."

My heart thuds against my ribs like a caged animal trying to break free. As the hard barrel of his gun presses harder into my skull, I feel a mix of anger and fear pumping through my veins. The thought of leaving Micah in their hands is unbearable, but the reality of facing death without even seeing her one last time forces me to swallow my pride. I tighten my jaw, feeling humiliation burn hotter than the fear.

"You'll pay for this," I manage to spit out through clenched teeth.

He chuckles, low and guttural, and the sound grates on my nerves like a rusty saw. "Sure, Santoro. We'll see about that," he says. I can sense him shifting behind me, most likely adjusting his stance for a better aim at my head.

"Your little plaything whom you call a wife is quite handy with a computer. Seems she knows how to move money in untraceable ways, or almost untraceable. I found her, didn't I?" He nudges my head with the barrel of the gun and then kicks the backs of my knees, and I drop to the ground. My knees slam hard into the tiled floor, sending a shockwave of pain up my spine. I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing me cry out.

"And to think," he continues, his voice filled with perverse glee, "you thought you could hide her from us. You thought you could get away with the thievery and bring us to our knees. Well, you were wrong."

"Wrong? We'll see who's wrong," I snarl back, though my gut clenches. I don't know what this brute is capable of doing to Micah, and the uncertainty is enough to make

me feel physically sick.

He laughs again in that same hollow, echoing way, like a predator toying with its prey. "I don't think you quite understand your position here, Santoro," he says, his voice dripping with a cruel kind of amusement.

"I understand perfectly," I retort. "I'm the one who's going to rip your throat out if you lay a finger on her."

A boot connects solidly with my side, knocking the breath out of me and causing me to double over in pain. The laughter echoes again, a grating cacophony in the desolate corridor. "Oh, you're a feisty one," the voice behind me taunts. "But let's see how much fight you have left in you, shall we?"

The weapon presses against my head once again, and I hear it click, the safety disengaging. I push myself upward, refusing to take this lying down, and grit my teeth as I wait for the resounding boom of my life being taken from me. But when it rips through the otherwise quiet hallway, it isn't a bullet in my head that happens.

I feel warmth across the back of my neck, and blood splatters the wall in front of me.

The brute behind me groans, his grip on the gun loosening until it clatters to the ground beside me. There's a thud and a grunt as his body crumples onto the floor. I scramble away from him, turning back to see a figure standing at the end of the hallway with a smoking gun.

Micah.

She's soaked to the bone, her damp hair tumbling around her shoulders, face pale but determined. The gun trembles slightly in her hand, but her gaze is steady, fixed on the fallen man at my feet. "Luke!" she calls out, rushing toward me.

Tears stream down her face, making paths through the dirt and grime. She stumbles as she nears me, dropping to her knees next to me. She tosses the gun aside. It clatters across the tiled floor and comes to rest against the wall. Her hands are on my face then, cupping my cheeks, thumbs tracing over my cheekbones. She's searching my eyes for something, reassurance, perhaps.

"Luke," she whispers again, voice heavy with relief. "I thought I was... I thought..." She can't finish the sentence. Instead, she buries her face into my shoulder, her body shaking.

"Hey, it's okay," I manage to say, wrapping my arms around her. The relief of feeling her, holding her, hearing her is intoxicating. An overwhelming wave of emotions floods me, the pain of my wounds becoming a dull afterthought.

"You came for me," she says, now sobbing into my chest as I stand, hoisting her off the floor where blood is beginning to pool.

"I had to. You're my best asset," I tell her, kissing her senseless. There isn't a spot on her face that goes untouched by my lips. She chuckles softly, then moans and wraps her arms around my torso tightly.

"They killed Will. We have to take him home."

My heart clenches, a painful reminder of the casualties of this treacherous game we're caught in. I nod, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. "We will," I promise her, my voice low and steady despite the turmoil raging within me.

I scoop her up and march with purpose back up the hallway. As I turn toward the exit, I see Vic with wide eyes and blood covering his torso. He's been hit and he's moving fast, which means he's being chased.

We run to the door and out into the rain which now comes down heavily. The car is running, and Dale's friend is behind the wheel, but as I slide Micah into the back seat and turn to see if Dale is coming, I see nothing.

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“He didn’t make it, Boss,” Vic mumbles, climbing in on the opposite side.

“Get us out of here,” I growl as I slam my door shut and hold Micah tightly to my side. “The team will get here and clean this up soon enough.”

The car whips down the street into the driving rain, and I emerge victorious again, minus one man this time. But I got that for which I came. And I need to get her home where it’s safe. We can sort the rest out later.

31

MICAH

I lay on the sofa curled up, staring out the front window. I see my father and Nathan walk past. I know they’re here to check on me again. They’ve come every day this week to visit. They sit with me for a few minutes until Luke tells them I’ve had enough, and then they kiss me goodbye and leave. Today, though, is Will’s funeral. I want to go, but Luke says it’s too dangerous. Besides, they aren’t having an open casket. I can’t even see him one last time.

“Micah,” Luke says softly, walking into the room followed by my father and brother.

I don’t even have enough emotional energy to sit up, but my eyes turn in their direction. They both wear black suits and ties. Nathan looks handsome. Dad looks old and tired. He probably fears for my life the way I feared for Will’s, but I know I’m safe here. I worry more about his being alone at that shop now, even with Luke’s men to guard him.

“We’re here, baby,” Dad says, crouching next to the couch. He pushes hair out of my eyes and tucks it behind my ear and smiles sadly. I can see he’s been crying. His eyes are puffy and red-rimmed. So are Nathan’s. I’m sure they’ve had conversations about me, about trying to get me away from Luke, but that’s not what I want anymore. I realized that the instant Will’s eyes shut for the last time.

I want to be with Luke. I want to partner with him to make those sick bastards pay for what they’ve done to my friend, and I want Luke’s protection for my father. At first, this trade-off felt like it wasn’t worth it. I felt like I’d been traded like a pawn in a game of chess. But Luke isn’t like that. Sure, he wants me to work for him. Yes, he has a bad temper that gets out of control sometimes. But I know deep down, he cares. He proved that to me.

“Dad...” I mumble as I force myself upright. Luke nods at me and leaves me alone with them. He understands that the way I love my family isn’t something he’ll ever understand. His upbringing was different, based on strict discipline and a demand for loyalty at all costs, whereas mine was built on love and mutual respect. Eventually, he’ll see, but for now, he prefers to leave me in privacy.

Dad slides onto the couch next to me, but Nathan hovers just outside of arm’s length. They’re both tense, and the creases in Dad’s forehead are deeper than ever.

“Will he let you leave?” Dad asks, insinuating that I want to go, as if we’ve spoken about this and I agreed to ask Luke for permission to leave him.

“Dad, I’m not leaving.” Feeling chilly, I pull my sweater closer around my body and curl around it. Dad rests a hand on my back and rubs in a small circle, the way he used to when I was a child feeling sick. I miss those days, the simplicity of them and the fact that Mom was still here. She wouldn’t know what to do now, either, but she’d at least know what to say to comfort my heart.

“Surely, he can’t expect you to stay now with everything that’s happened.” Dad doesn’t seem to realize that Luke’s protection is likely the only reason he and Nathan are still alive. If I leave Luke, all of that goes away, and something tells me the people who killed Will have enough resources to find us no matter where we go.

“I’m staying because I want to stay, Dad.” I look him directly in the eye, and he knows I’m serious. “I love him, and I want to be here.”

Dad’s head drops and he nods. “Then I respect that, but I can’t say I’m not concerned about it.” His hand slides off my back and rests on my knee. “What happened to you?” His question tears through my heart. Until now, he hasn’t asked, nor has Nathan, though we’ve spoken daily. I know they’re just trying to be sensitive to my feelings. I don’t know how much they know, though. I don’t want to tell him and cause him to panic.

I shrug a shoulder and look down at my stockinged feet. “I sort of didn’t listen to what Luke said. I left the house in the middle of the night to find Will. I knew he was taken by someone and I wanted to help him.” It’s hard for me to recount the details, so I stick to the vaguest retelling of the facts that I can. “I got close to where he was, and then Luke’s enemies caught me.”

Tears well up as I remember the look on Will’s face as the bullet hit him. There was so much blood, so much pain. But I bury that—a seed being sown toward the anger of tomorrow which I will use as fuel for my vengeance. I will root out his killer and get justice for him. Especially since the police believe this all to be a drive-by with no way to track the perpetrator.

“And Luke saved me.” I leave out the part where I murdered a man in cold blood, too. I’m not sorry about that. I saved Luke’s life and he saved mine. Now, we will avenge Will’s together and we will have each other as support the entire time. Just like I used to have Will.

“I’m so scared for you,” Nathan says, and I look up at him.

“Don’t be. I’m safe here. And you’re safe too, for the rest of your life. You won’t have to worry about anything.” I know Luke means it when he says he will protect my family. Had he known how special Will was to me, he’d have protected him too.

“We should go,” Dad says in a defeated tone. He isn’t happy about my staying with Luke, but he’ll support me, especially since I’ve set him up for life with my hacking. He and Nathan will never lack for anything ever again, at least as long as I stay loyal to Luke.

And how could I not? I’m in love with him. He and I are the same in some ways, different in others, but we compliment each other. And I know that despite his rugged exterior, he cares about me.

Dad stands and leads Nathan to the door after a kiss on my forehead. I watch them pause in the hall and have a brief, nearly silent exchange with Luke, who enters once they’ve left.

“I’m sorry you can’t go to the funeral,” he tells me as he takes the spot my father just vacated. “It’s just not safe.”

I lean into his side as he puts an arm around me and snuggles close to him so I can hear his heart beating. “It’s okay. I totally understand. I think I’m too sad to go, anyway. I want to remember Will the way we were, hacking together, goofing off after classes. And besides, I’m not feeling so well, anyway.”

Luke presses a hand to my forehead and grunts. “You don’t feel warm.”

“It’s not like that. I’m just feeling nauseous.” I shrug a shoulder and scoot closer, wrapping my arm around his torso. The fleeting thought that I may be pregnant

passes through my mind, and I smile contentedly as I lay my head on his chest.

“Well, I should help you to bed then...”

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“I think that’s a great idea,” I tell him, sliding my hand down over his groin. It’s been a few days since our bodies connected, and I can think of nothing else more satisfying and comforting than to feel his skin against mine.

“Mrs. Santoro, you’re being suggestive.”

“Then you should listen to my suggestion and heed it. Your wife is your greatest asset,” I whisper, standing to take his hand. Yes, I think we’ll work out just fine.

32

EPILOGUE

LUKE

I stand behind Micah as she leans over the computer. I’m still mesmerized by her talent and how fast her fingers move. In her new office, redecorated and set up exactly how she wants it, she not only runs her own business of web development but continues to hack for me. In fact, she and James—Dale’s friend who now works for me—have been running new scams for me, and I couldn’t be happier.

“Watch, watch!” James cautions from his desk across the room. I’d never have thought a man older than me would be so good at coding and tech, but he’s a genius, way better than Dale ever was—rest his soul.

“Yeah, I know... Sheesh,” Micah groans, her brow furrowed in concentration.

The latest hack they've been doing is to confuse our enemies' shipments at the port, sending containers to the wrong ships or warehouses. We've not only uncovered a smuggling ring and set hundreds of children free, but we've managed to significantly cripple their shipping. The city commissioner liked his new Lamborghini, delivered directly to his door with papers in his name thanks to Micah, and I have a new friend in the government.

"Look... Come on," Micah hums as she types faster. "Backing out... cover it."

"You've got it! Not even a trace you were there," James boasts, and Micah throws her hands up in celebration.

"We did it!" She claps and cheers, then spins around to face me. Her swelling stomach stretches her shirt out, and I couldn't be prouder. She stands and throws her arms around me, lavishing me in kisses while James finishes up, as he usually does.

"What was the game today?" I ask, careful not to press on her pregnant belly too much. With only six weeks left until birth, she's been uncomfortable. Though, with her stomach pushing into mine, I feel the movement inside her and grin.

"Well, we just sent the Russians' arms to the Port Authority and replaced it with a shipping container full of ice and mackerel." She snickers and kisses me, and I kiss her back, nipping at her lower lip.

"Feels like our little guy is active today," I say, letting a hand rest on her contorting belly. Every step of this pregnancy has been something new, learning about why she cries so easily, giving in to her cravings for pickles dipped in ice cream. I have adored every second of it except for the mood swings when I had no clue how to help her.

"He's a little soccer player," she says, taking my hand and moving it around to the other side where I feel the rhythmic thumping of his little feet inside her womb. "He doesn't let me get a break for a second."

We discovered she was pregnant only a week after her friend died, and months later, when we learned our child will be a boy, we chose the name Luciano William Santoro, to honor his legacy. I don't mind sharing that honor because I have the best prize ever, my beautiful and intelligent wife.

"What do you say we celebrate?" she asks, rising up on her tiptoes to peck me on the cheek again.

"What do you have in mind, Mrs. Santoro?" I ask her as I hold her against my body. She rises up and whispers unmentionable things in my ear, and I feel warmth spread through my body. In a few short weeks, I'll be banished from partaking of her heavenly body, so I'm not going to tell her no at all right now.

"I think that sounds like a good idea," I tell her, and she looks over her shoulder.

"James, I have some business to tend to. Finish that hack, then get to work on the bakery website. We can't delay with the back end on that one. Our front end team is waiting for us to finish the backlog." Micah's orders are heeded with a nod, and James waves her off as I take her hand and pull her toward the door.

One thing is certain. I am a better man thanks to this woman. Our families are thrilled for her to be pregnant, as am I, and none of us can wait to see the little heir be born. Best of all, my enemies are weak, and I am the head of the largest and strongest Family in this city. Never in a million years did I think my life would turn out this good.

I think my father is looking down on me from above, making sure the dice land in my favor.