



Protecting Lanie (Club Tales #6)

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Description: He's a daddy dom with a code. She's a survivor seeking peace. Together, they'll face a danger neither saw coming.

Lanie's life revolves around baking decadent pastries at Club Southside, where she hides her trauma behind the comforting chaos of the kitchen. But when she literally crashes into Archer, an enigmatic operative for Cerberus, everything changes. His calm, commanding presence sparks a hope she thought long buried.

Archer lives by strict rules: protect and never get attached. But Lanie's blend of vulnerability and quiet resilience is impossible to ignore. When rumors of a dangerous human trafficking ring linked to Lanie's abusive ex resurface, Archer's protective instincts shift into overdrive.

As a shadowy threat closes in, Lanie must confront her deepest fears and find the courage to trust again. Archer will stop at nothing to keep her safe, even if it means breaking every rule in his book. Their growing attraction ignites in a high-stakes game of control and surrender, where one wrong move could cost them everything.

With a villain watching their every step and secrets unraveling, survival isn't just about staying alive, it's about learning to trust each other with their hearts.

Total Pages (Source): 13

CHAPTER 1

ARCHER

Two Years Ago

Boston, Massachusetts

The rain came down in sheets, soaking Archer Vaughn to the bone as he pressed his back against the cold brick of the warehouse. The constant patter of water masked the sound of the boots from his team moving into position, but Archer barely noticed. His earpiece buzzed with static as Kane, who was acting as his second-in-command, whispered from the other side of the building.

“West entrance secure. Two guards down. Your move, Archer.”

Archer didn't respond immediately. His focus was razor-sharp, locked on the entrance. Before him a pair of burly guards smoked beneath a flickering floodlight. The air stank of damp concrete and burnt tobacco, and Archer's gut twisted as he thought of what waited inside. The bastard traffickers weren't just selling people tonight—they were selling them like commodities, stripped of names, dignity, and freedom. Among the victims, Archer's sister, Meri, haunted his every thought.

“Copy that,” Archer finally replied, his voice low but firm. “Team two, stand by for breach on my mark. Remember, getting the girls out is our top priority.”

“You got it,” Reyna whispered. She sounded calm, but Archer could hear the tension.

This wasn't her first op with Cerberus, but it was her first against the Master's Market. It was personal for all of them.

Archer raised a gloved hand, signaling Logan, their demolitions expert, to get into position with a breaching charge. The young man moved with precision, his lean form almost blending into the shadows. When Logan gave a thumbs-up, Archer nodded. "On three," he murmured into the comms. "One...two..."

The explosion wasn't loud, but it was enough to send the guards scrambling. Before they could react, Archer was on them, his movements fluid and brutal. His elbow cracked against one guard's jaw, sending the man sprawling. The other reached for his weapon, but Kane appeared like a phantom, snapping the man's wrist and slamming him to the ground.

"Stay quiet," Archer growled at the groaning men, pulling zip ties from his vest. He glanced at Kane. "Inside. Now."

The two of them slipped through the breached door, followed closely by Logan and Reyna. The warehouse was a cavernous maze of dimly lit corridors, the air oppressive with the stench of sweat and fear. Archer's gut twisted as they neared the main room, where muffled voices and occasional cheers echoed.

He signaled for silence, holding up a clenched fist. The team froze, their breathing barely audible. Archer crept forward, peering around the corner. His blood ran cold.

The room was a twisted mockery of an auction house. A raised platform held a line of young naked women and girls, their wrists bound, their eyes wide with terror. Men in suits lounged in the front rows, holding tablets where they placed their bids. At the back of the room, Daryl DeLuca leaned against a desk, his dark eyes scanning the room with predatory ease. Archer's stomach clenched at the sight of him. The man oozed control, his smirk a reminder that he believed he was untouchable.

And among the captives on stage was Meri.

Archer's breath caught, but he shoved the panic down. There wasn't time for emotion. Not yet. "Logan, take out the lights," he whispered into his mic. "Reyna, be ready to move the girls. Kane, on me."

The team responded with a chorus of quiet affirmations. Archer counted down silently in his head. The second the lights went out, chaos erupted.

Men shouted as darkness swallowed the room. Archer surged forward, his night vision goggles sliding into place. He took down the first guard with a swift kick to the chest, then spun to disarm another. Gunfire erupted, the muzzle flashes briefly illuminating the room, but Archer was already moving, his focus honed on one target: DeLuca.

"Get the merchandise out!" DeLuca barked into his mic. "Do not let them get taken!"

Archer reached the stage just as DeLuca's men began herding the captives toward a side exit. Meri was among them, her slight frame almost hidden by the taller girls. Archer's chest tightened as he fought his way through the crowd, every fiber of his being screaming to reach her. But DeLuca was already moving, dragging Meri with him toward a black van waiting just outside.

"DeLuca!" Archer roared, his voice cutting through the cacophony. The trafficker paused, turning just enough to meet Archer's gaze. For a split second, their eyes locked—one man filled with icy resolve, the other with calculated amusement.

"You're too late, Vaughn," DeLuca called, his voice smooth and taunting. "This round is a draw—you might nab the buyers and the girls already sold, but I have the premium merchandise."

Archer raised his gun, but DeLuca ducked behind a wall of his men, forcing Archer to take cover as bullets ricocheted off the metal scaffolding around him. When he looked up again, the van was gone, and with it, Meri.

“Dammit!” Archer slammed his fist against the stage, rage and frustration boiling inside him. But there was no time to dwell. His earpiece crackled.

“Archer, we’ve got the remaining girls secured,” Reyna reported. “But we’ve got incoming—more of DeLuca’s men.”

“Blow the hard drives,” Archer ordered, his voice like steel. “Leave nothing for them to use. Kane, regroup at the extraction point. We’re pulling out.”

Kane’s voice came through, grim but resolute. “Copy that. On our way.”

As Archer made his way back through the chaos, he saw the faces of the girls his team had managed to save. Their expressions ranged from terrified to relieved, their whispered cries a stark reminder of what they’d endured. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. But they were alive.

Archer and his team regrouped outside the warehouse as flames began licking at the inner structure of the building. Logan’s handiwork had ensured there’d be no evidence left behind for DeLuca’s operation to recover.

“Mission accomplished,” Kane said, clapping Archer on the shoulder. “At least for tonight.”

Archer’s jaw clenched as he stared at the burning building. “Not for me,” he muttered, his voice barely audible.

Reyna stepped closer, her hand brushing his arm. “We’ll find her, Archer. We’ll find

Meri. And we'll end DeLuca and his Master's Market."

He didn't respond, his gaze fixed on the horizon where DeLuca's van had disappeared. The night was far from over. And as the embers of the warehouse glowed in the darkness, Archer made a silent vow: he would tear DeLuca's empire apart brick by brick, no matter the cost.

LANIE

One Year Ago

Boston, Massachusetts

The apartment smelled like danger. She wasn't sure what danger smelled like, but this had to be it. Lanie didn't know how else to describe it. The faint, metallic scent of Vinnie's gun seemed to hang in the air, mingling with the cloying scent of Vinnie's cologne and something else. Fear? She stood frozen in the dim living room, her hands clutching the strap of her purse as she watched him pour two glasses of whiskey. Although his movements were casual and fluid, Lanie Cross saw through them. There was something simmering beneath his cool facade tonight. Something darker than usual.

"Relax, baby," Vinnie said, his smile slick as he offered her a glass. "You're wound tighter than a clock."

Lanie hesitated before taking it, her fingers brushing against his for the briefest second. She hated that she still flinched at his touch, hated that her body betrayed her even when her instincts screamed to run. But where would she go? She had nowhere. No one.

She swallowed hard. "You said you wanted to talk," she said, keeping her voice

steady despite the knot in her throat. “What’s going on, Vinnie?”

He chuckled, taking a sip from his glass as he leaned against the edge of the couch. His dark eyes raked over her, sharp and assessing. “Straight to the point. That’s what I love about you, Lanie.” He gestured toward her with the glass. “That, and that you’re perfect. Too perfect to waste flipping pancakes at some greasy diner.”

Her stomach churned. She didn’t trust compliments from Vinnie. They always came with a hook. “I don’t mind my job,” she said carefully. “It pays the bills.”

“Come on, sweetheart. You think I don’t know you’re better than that?” He pushed off the couch and moved toward her, circling her like a predator stalking its prey. “You’ve got this...innocence about you. It’s intoxicating. Hell, it’s exactly what the right man would pay a fortune for.”

Her breath hitched, and she took a step back. “What are you talking about?”

Vinnie smirked, setting his glass down on the coffee table. “I’m talking about opportunity, baby. For both of us.” He tilted his head, his gaze narrowing. “I’ve been investing in you, haven’t I? Helping you become the woman you’re meant to be?”

Her pulse thundered in her ears. She thought back to the nights he’d coaxed her into wearing clothes that felt too revealing, the times he’d pushed her boundaries in ways that left her questioning herself. He’d called it “helping her grow.” She’d called it unsettling.

“Vinnie,” she said slowly, “you’re scaring me.”

He laughed, but it was humorless. “Don’t be scared. I’ve been taking care of you, haven’t I? You trust me, right?”

Her stomach twisted into a knot. She didn't trust him. Not anymore. Not since she'd glimpsed his phone weeks ago and seen the name the Master's Market at the top of his screen. She'd brushed it off as her imagination then, but now? Now the pieces were clicking into place, and the picture they formed was horrifying.

"I..." Her voice cracked, and she forced herself to look him in the eye. "What do you mean, opportunity? What are you planning, Vinnie?"

He sighed, as if disappointed. "See, this is why I didn't want to tell you yet. You always overthink things. But fine, I'll spell it out." He grabbed her wrist, pulling her closer until their faces were inches apart. "I've been talking to some buyers. Good men. Powerful men. They've seen your pictures, Lanie. They're interested."

The blood drained from her face. "What?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"Don't act so shocked," he said, his tone hardening. "You were made for this. You've got that sweet, submissive look that drives men crazy. And you've been practicing, haven't you? Learning to obey, to trust?"

Her chest tightened. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening. "I thought you were helping me," she said, her voice trembling. "I thought..."

"Helping you?" He barked out a laugh. "I was preparing you. And now it's time for you to step up and do your part. Tonight, we're meeting with a buyer from the cartel. He wants a taste, and if he likes what he sees, we're talking six figures."

"No." The word burst from her lips before she could stop it. She yanked her wrist free, stumbling back a step. "No, Vinnie. You can't do this."

His expression darkened, and for the first time, she saw the full weight of his cruelty. "Don't be stupid, Lanie," he snarled. "You think you have a choice? You owe me."

Every meal, every piece of clothing, every night I let you stay under my roof—you owe me.”

Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “I’m not your property,” she said, her voice firmer now. “And I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He moved fast, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her hard. “You listen to me, you ungrateful little...”

The sound of her glass shattering against the side of his head interrupted him. Lanie didn’t hesitate. When his grip faltered, she twisted free and bolted for the door. She could hear him cursing behind her, the thud of his footsteps growing louder as he chased her down the hallway.

“Lanie! Don’t you dare...”

She didn’t look back. Her bare feet pounded against the linoleum as she sprinted down the stairs, her heart pounding like a drum. She burst out into the chilly night air, the sharp wind biting at her skin. Her only thought was to run . Run and don’t stop.

She darted into the shadows of an alley, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She could still hear his voice echoing in her head, promising retribution. But he wouldn’t follow her. Not if what he said about the cartel was true. If his boss, Daryl DeLuca, found out Vinnie had gone rogue, it would mean more than a scolding. Vinnie was as much a pawn as she had been.

Still, she couldn’t take any chances. She had to disappear, to vanish so completely that even Vinnie wouldn’t dare come after her.

She pressed a hand to her chest, willing herself to calm down. “Think, Lanie,” she whispered. “Think.”

Her gaze fell on a bus schedule taped to a nearby pole. Chicago. It wasn't far, and it was big enough to get lost in. A spark of hope ignited in her chest, faint but insistent.

The sound of a door slamming nearby jolted her into motion. She darted out of the alley and toward the bus station, her determination drowning out the fear.

As the city lights blurred around her, Lanie swore to herself she'd survive. She'd start over. And she'd never let anyone control her again.

CHAPTER 2

LANIE

P resent Day

The scent of vanilla and cinnamon wrapped around Lanie like a warm embrace, the familiar comfort of sugar and butter melting into the air as she worked. The kitchen at Club Southside was a world of controlled chaos, but she found solace in the rhythm of it—measuring, mixing, kneading. It kept her hands busy, her mind occupied.

And that was exactly what she needed.

She pressed her palm flat against the cool marble countertop, exhaling slowly before reaching for the piping bag. The macarons had to be perfect—delicate shells with just the right amount of give, filled with rich, silky ganache. There wasn't room for mistakes. Not here. Not when perfection was the only thing she had control over anymore.

“Lanie, you're gonna wear a hole in the damn counter,” Tessa, the club's head bartender, teased as she breezed in, snagging a chocolate truffle off a tray.

Lanie startled, her grip tightening around the bag. “God, Tess. At least let me finish plating before you steal them.”

Tessa winked, popping the truffle into her mouth with a satisfied hum. “You know I can't help myself. Besides, don't pretend like you're not stress-baking.”

“I’m not...” Lanie stopped, pressing her lips together. Tessa wasn’t wrong. The constant need to keep moving, to stay productive, to focus on anything but the past... it was a habit she hadn’t been able to shake.

Tessa gave her a knowing look, but before she could say anything, Logan, one of the club’s Doms, leaned through the kitchen’s side door. “Lanie, need those pastries for the VIP lounge, like, five minutes ago.”

“On it.” Lanie quickly arranged the last row of treats onto a silver tray. With practiced ease, she lifted it and turned...

And slammed straight into something solid.

The tray tipped, the delicate pastries cascading like falling dominoes. Some tumbled to the floor, others landed against the broad chest of the man she’d crashed into, smearing buttercream and ganache across his bare, sculpted torso.

Lanie sucked in a sharp breath, heart lurching as she looked up—way up—into the most commanding face she’d ever seen.

Archer Vaughn.

She knew who he was, of course. Everyone at Club Southside did. The man carried an air of authority so thick it seemed to have settled over him like a shroud. He too was a Dom at the club; he moved through the space like he owned it—calm, controlled, unreadable. His presence sent a ripple through any room he entered, and tonight was no different.

Except now he was standing there, chest dusted with powdered sugar, golden-brown macarons sticking to his chest, and the full force of his gaze pinned on her.

Lanie's pulse skittered like hummingbird wings.

"Oh, God," she blurted, mortified. "I...I'm so sorry..."

Archer didn't move. Didn't flinch. He simply looked at her, his eyes dark and steady, assessing in a way that made her feel bare despite the layers of her chef's coat.

"Breathe," he said, his voice a low command.

Her breath hitched, and she realized she wasn't breathing. She forced air into her lungs, her cheeks flaming hot.

Tessa let out a low whistle from behind her. "Well, that's one way to make an impression."

Lanie felt her stomach twist. Impression? No. Disaster? Absolutely.

"I'll...I'll clean it up," she rushed to say, dropping to her knees to scoop up the ruined pastries and finding herself at groin level. Before she could do anything but stare at his leathers, which showed a hardening cock behind the fly, Archer crouched beside her.

He cupped her chin in his hand, and its gentleness surprised her. She stilled.

"Eyes up here, pet," he rumbled.

Her eyes met his, and she felt as though she could spend forever there. The last thing she expected was for him to help.

His fingers brushed over hers as he grabbed a macaron and popped it in his mouth, seeming to savor it before swallowing. The brief contact sent a jolt through her that

had nothing to do with shock.

“Not the end of the world and these are delicious, little one.” His voice was smooth, unwavering. But something about the way he said little one made her insides twist in a way that had nothing to do with embarrassment.

She shook her head quickly. “No, but it’s a mess, and it was my fault. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

His lips parted slightly, as if considering her words. “Accidents happen.” He popped another macaron in his mouth with what seemed to be deliberate slowness. “But you seem ready to punish yourself for it.”

She swallowed. Hard. She hated he could see that.

“I just don’t enjoy screwing up,” she admitted, keeping her eyes on the floor.

Archer was silent for a beat. Then, softly, “Has anyone ever told you that making a mistake doesn’t make you one?”

Her breath caught, her gaze snapping to his.

How did he do that? How did he see right through her with just a handful of words?

Before she could respond, Logan reappeared. “Uh... is now a bad time to ask if there’s a backup tray?”

Lanie blinked, the moment fracturing around her. “Right. Yes. There is.” She pushed herself to her feet quickly, stepping away from Archer before she did something reckless—like lean into him, just to see if his strength was as unshakable as it seemed.

“I’ll get it,” she said, smoothing a hand down the front of her apron. “Tessa, can you...”

“Already on it.” Tessa shot her a knowing grin before ducking into the walk-in cooler.

Archer stood smoothly, towering over her once again. He should’ve looked ridiculous, standing there in his leathers, which were now covered in sugar and cream, but he didn’t. He looked exactly the same—composed, steady. And that was what unsettled her the most.

“You’re shaking,” he observed, his voice quieter now.

Lanie curled her fingers into fists at her sides. She was. Not from fear, but from something she couldn’t name. Something he stirred inside her.

“I’ll be fine,” she said quickly, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

Archer studied her for a long moment before nodding once. “Good.”

Just as he turned to leave, she surprised herself by speaking. “Wait.”

He stilled, glancing back.

She exhaled. “Your leathers...I should at least offer to get them cleaned.”

His lips curved slightly—just enough for her to catch a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “Don’t worry about it, little one.”

And then he was gone, leaving her standing there, heart pounding, hands still sticky with sugar.

Tessa reappeared, tray in hand, eyebrows raised. “So... that was interesting.”

Lanie huffed, reaching for the fresh pastries. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Tessa grinned. “Oh, we’re definitely talking about it.”

Lanie turned toward the lounge with the tray, but she could feel Archer’s gaze still lingering on her. And for the first time in a long time, the thought of a man watching her didn’t make her want to run. It made her want to stay.

That thought put some sway in her backside as she sashayed away. He probably wouldn’t notice, but a girl could dream.

When she returned to the kitchen, its familiar rhythm helped to soothe the last of Lanie’s frayed nerves. The scent of vanilla and caramel wrapped around her like a protective cocoon, the hum of the mixers a welcome distraction. She focused on her work, carefully piping thick swirls of chocolate ganache onto delicate eclairs, pushing aside the ever-present undercurrent of unease that had been trailing her for weeks.

Club Southside was her safe space. Here, she was Lanie Cross, pastry chef—nothing more, nothing less. Not someone’s property. Not someone’s target. Just a woman who had found a place where she could breathe. As funny as it sounded, she had learned that Club Southside was a safe haven.

Sure, there were Doms and Dommes galore, but a submissive’s word was law and if someone said no, they meant it, and if necessary, one of the Cerberus Team would back it up. Cerberus, now there was an interesting group. As far as she could tell, each and every one of them had membership rights in the club, and most were active practitioners.

The sound of footsteps and laughter from the lounge filtered in through the kitchen’s

open doorway. The club was alive tonight, its usual buzz of low conversation and sensual play filling the air. She liked it best when she could hear the activity but remain tucked away in her domain, far from the temptations and dangers lurking on the other side of those doors.

Then she heard it.

Vinnie's name.

Lanie's hand stilled mid-pipe, her breath catching in her throat. The voice was male, deep, conversational.

"Yeah, Molina's still got his hands in a few things. Thought he went quiet for a while, but looks like he's back in play."

The air in the room seemed to shift, tightening around her like invisible fingers closing over her throat.

No. It was a coincidence. It had to be.

Lanie forced herself to breathe, forced her fingers to move. She had escaped. He had let her go. That had to mean something.

Another voice responded, casual, disinterested. "Shit. That guy's got a reputation, even in the underground. Heard he had a real sweet setup before his boss found out."

She swallowed hard. The room was too small, the air too thick.

They weren't talking about her.

They couldn't be.

Shoving the thought aside, she wiped her hands on her apron and forced herself to step away from the counter. She needed to get out of this damn kitchen for a few minutes before her heartbeat rattled straight out of her chest.

She moved toward the doorway, keeping her gaze lowered, carefully avoiding eye contact with the patrons filling the club's dimly lit lounge area. The last thing she wanted was attention.

But she got it anyway.

Someone brushed against her—too close, too intentional. A hand skated lightly over the small of her back, not quite a grope, but enough to make her entire body seize.

Bile rose in her throat. She knew that move. Knew it well. It was a test, a way to see how much someone would allow before they pulled away.

Lanie went stiff, stepping sharply to the side, her breath coming faster.

“Relax, sweetheart.” The man's voice was smooth, charming—wrong. “Didn't mean to startle you.”

Every instinct she had screamed at her to move, to run...

Then another presence emerged from the shadows.

Archer.

She didn't hear him approach, but suddenly he was there, a looming force of pure control. His presence filled the space, blocking out everything else, and in an instant, the man who had touched her withdrew, his effortless charm slipping into something wary.

“Something wrong here?” Archer’s voice was quiet, even—but there was nothing soft about it.

The man...John, maybe? James?...held up his hands. “Hey, man. No need to get involved. Just talking.”

Archer’s gaze didn’t shift. Didn’t waver. “Is that right?”

John-or-James shifted on his feet. “Didn’t mean anything by it.”

Archer’s eyes flicked to her, and that steady gaze unraveled her completely.

“You good, Lanie?”

She could barely form words, but she nodded.

Archer’s expression didn’t change, but something in him settled. His next words were for the other man.

“You touch her again or any of the other submissives here at the club without an invitation, and you and I will have a problem.” It wasn’t a threat. It was a fact.

The other man didn’t argue. He muttered something under his breath before disappearing into the crowd.

Lanie exhaled sharply, pressing a hand to her chest.

“You should tell one of the Doms if someone makes you uncomfortable.” Archer’s voice was still calm, but there was something else there now—something sharper, like the edge of a blade.

She forced a shaky breath. “I can handle myself.”

His brow lifted slightly, assessing her. “I don’t doubt that.” A pause. “But that doesn’t mean you have to.”

Lanie swallowed hard.

Archer was a Dom at Club Southside. But he didn’t need to be. His authority came from something deeper, something ingrained. The way he commanded the space, the way people responded to him—it made her insides coil in a way she really didn’t want to think about.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He nodded once, accepting it without making it a big deal. “Get some air,” he said simply, before stepping back, giving her space.

She did. She forced her legs to move, retreating to the kitchen, focusing on the simple certainty of her work.

For the rest of the night, she avoided looking at Archer, but she felt his eyes on her, anyway.

It was late by the time Lanie finished cleaning. The kitchen was silent now, the chaos of the night fading into stillness.

She dried her hands, reaching for her phone...

And froze.

One unread message.

No number. No name. Just words that made her blood run ice cold.

Miss me, baby?

Lanie's fingers clenched around the phone so hard it hurt.

No. No, no, no.

Vinnie had stayed away for a year. Why now?

She forced herself to breathe, her heart hammering against her ribs. This meant nothing. It couldn't.

Maybe it was a mistake. A sick joke. Maybe?—

Her breath stalled as three dots appeared.

He was still typing.

She didn't wait to see what he said next.

Lanie shut off her phone, pressing it hard against her palm, as if that could erase the way her entire world had just tilted on its axis.

She wasn't safe. She had never been safe. And now, she wasn't sure if she ever would be again.

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CHAPTER 3

ARCHER

Archer had spent the past ten years hunting the worst kind of men. The kind who saw people as commodities, who whispered in dark corners about shipments rather than human lives. He'd spent those years tracking them, dismantling their operations, and ensuring they never saw daylight again.

That kind of work left scars. Some were visible, most were not.

Which was why he was here—Club Southside. It wasn't just a place for him to play; it was a place where he could observe. Watch without being watched. Unwind without truly relaxing.

Archer sat in his usual spot, a dimly lit booth near the back, nursing a bourbon he didn't plan on finishing. The club pulsed with low music, a steady beat that hummed through the floor. Subtle sounds filled the air—gasps of pleasure, quiet commands from Doms, the occasional murmur of conversation.

He barely registered any of it.

Because his focus kept straying to her.

Lanie Cross.

She moved behind the bar with careful efficiency, stacking plates, wiping down the

counter, trying too damn hard to make herself invisible. But he saw her.

He always saw her.

She differed from the other women who worked at Club Southside. The subs here moved with purpose, with confidence. Even when they weren't playing, they carried themselves with a quiet assurance, secure in who they were, and that they were safe.

But Lanie? She was all contradiction.

Timid, but not weak. Shy, but with an undercurrent of something deeper—fire, maybe. It was in the way her hands never quite stopped moving, in the way she hesitated when someone got too close, yet never truly backed down.

When he'd first gotten into the lifestyle, he'd never been the kind of man to be drawn to fragile things. Lanie wasn't fragile, but often he needed to break down submissives like her before rebuilding them. The trick was to do so without damaging the person within.

The more he understood it, the more he realized he had spent his whole life in service of one kind or another. A Dom who served his sub was just one more step along that road, and recognizing he was actually a Daddy Dom—a Dom who takes on a nurturing, protective, and authoritative role in the dynamic with his or her partner—had been the next step along his path. Unlike a traditional Dom, a Daddy Dom often emphasized care, guidance, and emotional support while maintaining control and enforcing discipline.

There was something broken about Lanie... something that called to him to help her rebuild whatever she had lost. He had to give it to her. It seemed she was trying. And that intrigued him more than it should have.

“Didn’t know you were into the quiet ones,” a voice drawled beside him. “I thought you were the resident brat tamer.”

Archer didn’t need to look to know who had slid into the booth across from him. Mason Carter, one of his informants—and a Cerberus asset who had more connections to the underground than Archer was comfortable with.

“I’m not,” Archer said, keeping his voice neutral.

Mason chuckled. “Sure. That’s why you’ve been staring at her for the past hour.”

Archer didn’t respond. He wasn’t in the mood for games.

Mason leaned back, stretching out like an alley cat who’d just snagged a bowl of cream. “Relax, Vaughn. Just came to share some intel.”

Archer shifted his gaze from Lanie and focused fully on Mason. “Talk.”

The affable grin on Mason’s face faded just a fraction. “Heard a name I thought you’d be interested in.” He took a slow sip of his drink before continuing. “Vinnie Molina.”

Every muscle in Archer’s body went tight.

Mason had his attention now. Archer nodded, “Go on.”

“Rumor has it he’s trying to reconnect with the major players. He kept a low profile for a while—guess he had some personal issues to deal with.”

Molina had been a low-level recruiter for one of the most vile trafficking networks Archer had ever encountered. Molina was the kind of scum who groomed. He didn’t

snatch girls off the street. No, he earned their trust, conditioned them, and then delivered them straight into hell.

Archer's fingers curled around his glass. "Who's he working with?"

Mason shrugged. "Unclear. But the name keeps floating around, and when I hear a snake slithering back into the pit, I figure it's worth mentioning." He tilted his head. "You got a history with this one?"

Archer didn't answer.

Because his eyes had drifted back to Lanie.

And suddenly, a very dangerous thought slithered into his mind.

Personal issues.

His gut twisted. He didn't believe in coincidences. And the unease Lanie carried, the way she flinched at unexpected touches, the way she seemed to always be on guard...

It wasn't just his interest in her making connections now, it was instinct.

He turned back to Mason. "Where's he operating?"

Mason exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. "Like I said, not sure. But I can dig." His gaze flickered toward Lanie, interest sparking. "That one of yours?"

A low warning settled into Archer's tone. "No."

Mason lifted an eyebrow, but his grin widened. "Could've fooled me."

Archer ignored the jab. “Find out where Molina’s been. I want every detail.”

Mason saluted lazily. “You got it, boss.”

Archer leaned back, forcing himself to think. He wondered at her reaction from hearing Molina’s name. Could she have overheard something, or was she connected to Molina in some other way. If she was, she wasn’t safe.

And if that were so, he had a problem.

Lanie moved through the lounge like she was trying to disappear, shoulders drawn in, hands gripping an empty tray so tightly that her knuckles had gone white. The club’s usual atmosphere—the low thrum of music, the steady murmur of conversation, the occasional crack of a whip or soft moan from one of the private rooms—had no effect on her. She wasn’t absorbing the energy of the place the way the other submissives did.

She was enduring it, and she was struggling.

Archer had been watching her all night, not by choice, but because his instincts wouldn’t allow otherwise.

Lanie had that kind of fragile strength that made men like him take notice. The kind that showed she had been broken before but was still standing. They weren’t all in one piece, but they were picking up the pieces, trying to figure out how to make them whole again. The kind that made men like Vinnie Molina salivate at the idea of exploiting them.

A low growl vibrated in his chest at the thought, but he pushed it down. He was here to unwind, not to fix things that weren’t his business.

But when Lanie tried to weave through the crowd and a club patron grabbed her wrist, her body jerking in alarm, Archer was moving before he even thought about it. This was the second time a patron had put hands on her. Perhaps King should go over the rules again. Club Southside did not tolerate that kind of behavior.

He reached her in three strides, his hand closing over the man's arm before she could yank free.

"Hands off," Archer ordered, voice quiet but lethal.

The man startled, looking up with a hazy, half-drunken expression. "Didn't mean anything by it," he muttered, releasing Lanie immediately.

Archer didn't let go. His grip remained firm, his gaze steady. "She works here. She's not here for you."

The message was plain to see. Not available. Not an option. Not yours.

The man nodded quickly, stepping back and disappearing into the crowd.

His attention shifting to Lanie—she stood frozen, her breath coming faster than it should, her wide doe eyes locked onto him. He expected her to pull away, to mutter a quick "I'm fine" and disappear into the kitchen.

She didn't.

Instead, she took a breath. A deep one. Like she was forcing herself to remember where she was, who she was.

That fire was still in her, even under the fear—another thing Archer liked more than he should.

“Come with me,” he said, voice softer now. He didn’t ask. He didn’t need to.

Lanie hesitated, just for a second, then nodded.

He guided her out of the crowd, keeping his body angled between her and anyone who might try to test his warning. She was too on edge, too shaken, and it irritated him. She shouldn’t have to put up with this kind of thing.

They reached a quiet hallway near the club’s back entrance, dimly lit and lined with sleek black walls. The noise from the lounge faded, replaced by the low hum of the ventilation system.

Lanie let out a breath and finally looked at him. “I had it handled.”

Archer crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. “Did you?”

Her jaw tensed. “I could’ve walked away.”

He nodded slowly. “You could have. But you didn’t.”

She didn’t have a response to that.

Instead, she folded her arms, mirroring his stance, though the effect was very different. Despite her small size compared to his, he knew she would fight fiercely if she had to.

And that’s what got to him. He’d seen plenty of survivors in his life. Women who had been through hell and come out on the other side. Some had hardened, some had broken. Lanie seemed to still be trying to figure it out.

And for the first time in years, something inside Archer shifted—an instinct deeper

than duty, something undeniably possessive.

He protected people. Submissives. Those who needed it. It was what he did.

But this? This was different. This felt personal. And that was dangerous.

His jaw tightened. “You don’t like crowds.”

Lanie blinked, startled by the change in topic. “What?”

“You don’t like people touching you. You don’t enjoy being the center of attention.”

He kept his voice even. “So, why are you here?”

She hesitated. He saw the flicker of uncertainty, the instinct to retreat behind a quick excuse. But then she surprised him.

“I’m not a member of the club, but I wanted to see if there might be something here for me,” she admitted. “To see if I could be... normal again.”

Archer exhaled through his nose, studying her. “And?”

She gave a half-laugh. “Jury’s still out.”

He didn’t smile, but something shifted inside him.

“You don’t have to force yourself,” he said. “You get to decide what normal looks like for you.”

Lanie looked at him like she didn’t quite believe that. Like no one had ever told her that before.

Before he could say anything else, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Work.

He pulled it out, glancing at the message.

Cerberus Op: URGENT. Molina linked to expanding BDSM trafficking ring in Chicago. New players in town. Details incoming.

A slow burn started in Archer's chest.

Molina.

That was twice in one night his name had come up. And if Cerberus was already flagging an expansion into BDSM spaces, it meant shit was about to get dangerous.

Archer kept his expression unreadable as he tucked his phone away. This wasn't a coincidence. Molina wasn't just back—he was moving in on this territory.

And if that was the case, then Lanie might be in more danger than she realized.

His gaze flicked back to her, still standing there, still watching him like she was trying to figure him out.

Archer had spent years building a wall between his work and his personal life.

But for the first time in a long time, that wall cracked.

He pushed off the wall, stepping closer. "Lanie."

She swallowed. "Yeah?"

"Do you trust me?"

Her lips parted, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face. Then, finally, she whispered, “I think so.”

That was good enough... for now.

CHAPTER 4

LANIE

Lanie gripped the hem of her dress so tightly her knuckles ached. The beginner's submissive workshop was already in full swing, soft murmurs of conversation filling the lounge at Club Southside. She had taken a seat in the back, trying to shrink into the shadows, hoping no one would notice how out of place she felt.

The other attendees—most of them women, a few men—sat in a semi-circle around Master Dane, the club's resident trainer for new submissives. He was tall and broad, his dark hair streaked with silver, his voice commanding yet warm as he spoke about the foundations of submission.

"This isn't about giving up control," Dane said, his gaze sweeping over the group. "It's about learning to trust. To communicate. To know your limits and have them respected. For some, it's about finding a partner who can nurture or guide them. Submission, like dominance, doesn't come in one size fits all. It's up to you and your partner to communicate your needs and work together to see them fulfilled."

Lanie exhaled slowly. She had no idea why she'd let Tessa talk her into this.

"You work at the club , " her friend had said. "You should at least understand the dynamic. It doesn't mean you have to take part. Just... see how it feels."

That was the problem. Lanie already knew how submission felt.

Submission had been a trap. It had been Vinnie whispering in her ear, telling her what to wear, how to act, how to be the perfect little plaything—not for her pleasure, but for his.

She swallowed hard. That wasn't what this was.

This was safe. This was different.

So why did she feel like she didn't belong?

Her pulse kicked up when Master Dane's voice dropped to a lower timbre. "For tonight's sensory exercise, we have volunteer Doms who will help guide you. You are always in control. If something doesn't feel right, you say red and it stops immediately. Understood?"

A soft murmur of 'yes, Sirs' rippled through the group. Lanie managed a nod.

Dane turned, scanning the room. "Lanie."

She froze.

Every muscle in her body went tight as Dane motioned her forward. Shit. No. She wasn't ready.

But then she saw him.

Archer, standing just beyond the semi-circle, arms folded, watching her. The moment their eyes met, something inside her steadied. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't urging her forward. He was simply there, his presence like a solid, unshakable anchor.

She inhaled through her nose, exhaled through her mouth, and forced herself to stand.

The group parted slightly as she made her way toward Dane. He gestured toward Archer. “You’ll be working with Master Archer tonight.”

Her breath caught. She looked up at Archer, half expecting him to say no, not her, but he didn’t.

Instead, he simply held out his hand. “Come here, little one.”

Lanie hesitated for only a second before she placed her hand in his.

His fingers closed around hers—firm, warm, reassuring—and the second they touched, the tight coil of nerves in her stomach loosened just a little.

Archer led her to a quiet corner, away from the rest of the group. The club’s lighting was already low, but here, the shadows felt softer, more intimate.

“You good?” His voice was low, steady.

She nodded. “Yeah. Just... nervous.”

“That’s normal.” He squeezed her fingers before letting go. “I’ll talk you through everything before we start. You stop me at any point, understand?”

“Yes.”

His eyes flickered with something unreadable. “Yes, what?”

Her stomach flipped. “Yes, Sir.”

Archer’s expression didn’t change, but she swore the air between them shifted.

“Good girl.”

Heat curled low in her belly at those two simple words, her pulse skipping.

What the hell was wrong with her? She wasn't here to play. She wasn't here to feel anything. And yet, standing in front of this man, with his deep voice and steady hands and calm authority, she suddenly wanted to know what it would feel like to let go—just once.

Archer pulled a soft black blindfold from his back pocket, rolling the material between his fingers before looking at her. “Trust exercise.”

Her stomach tightened.

He must have seen it in her expression, because his voice softened. “We'll stop the second you want to.”

Lanie exhaled shakily and nodded.

“Turn around.”

She did. He stepped in close—not touching her, but close enough that she could feel the heat of his body behind her.

Her breathing went shallow.

The silk of the blindfold slid over her eyes, cool against her skin.

Her world went dark.

Archer's voice was the only thing left.

“I’m going to use a few different touches,” he murmured. “Nothing intense. Just sensation. Focus on what you feel. Not what you expect.”

Lanie’s hands balled into fists. Then something soft drifted across her shoulder. She shivered, her breath hitching.

A feather. She recognized the sensation instantly, light and teasing as it trailed down the length of her arm. She didn’t hate it.

Archer didn’t rush. He traced slow, deliberate paths along her skin, the faintest brush of touch that sent tiny ripples of awareness through her.

Her heartbeat kicked up for a different reason now.

“Doing okay?”

His voice was too close, too deep. It slid along her spine, pooling low in her belly.

Lanie swallowed hard. “Y-yeah.”

The feather drifted over her collarbone, down her wrist.

Then it was gone.

Something warmer took its place—his fingers.

The contrast made her whole body lock up.

He barely touched her, the lightest graze over the inside of her wrist, but it lingered.

A test. A question. A challenge.

She exhaled shakily, realizing she was gripping the sides of her dress too tight again.

Archer's fingers disappeared.

A second later, he was undoing the blindfold, sliding it away.

Light flooded her vision, but her world was still off balance.

He was so close.

She could see everything—the sharp cut of his jaw, the controlled calm in his eyes, the way his fingers were curled like he wanted to touch her again but wouldn't unless she asked.

Lanie swallowed, her throat dry. "That was..."

Archer tilted his head. "Too much?"

She licked her lips. "No."

That word came too quickly. His gaze dropped to her mouth, and her breath stalled. Something flickered in his expression. Not amusement. Not arrogance. Something darker. Something dangerous. For one wild second, she thought he was going to kiss her.

But then he stepped back.

"Workshop's wrapping up," he murmured. "You did good, little one."

Then he walked away, leaving her standing there—still feeling his touch even though he was already gone.

Lanie sat on the leather couch in one of the quieter corners of the lounge, her fingers curled around the warm mug of tea Archer had handed her. She wasn't sure how they'd ended up here. One minute, she'd been walking out of the beginner's submissive workshop, mind still tangled in the lingering awareness of Archer's touch. The next, he'd been at her side, guiding her to this quiet, dimly lit space.

"You should eat something," Archer said, his deep voice pulling her back.

She looked up at him. He was standing near the couch, arms crossed, his sharp gaze assessing her. His presence had the same effect on her as always—steady, unyielding, commanding.

"I'm not hungry," she murmured, lifting the mug to her lips. The warmth seeped into her fingers, grounding her.

"You need more than tea," Archer said, voice calm but firm.

She lowered the cup, exhaling. "I'll grab something later."

His jaw tightened slightly, but he didn't push. Instead, he took the chair across from her, leaning forward slightly, his forearms resting on his knees. The way he watched her made it impossible to hide.

"You handled yourself well tonight," he said after a long pause. "You were nervous, but you didn't let it stop you."

Lanie let out a quiet breath. "I almost didn't go."

"Why did you?"

She hesitated. The simple answer was because Tessa had pushed her into it. But that

wasn't really true.

"Because I wanted to see if it was different," she admitted, tracing a finger along the rim of her mug. "If it could be something other than..."

She trailed off, unsure how to put it into words.

Archer didn't rush her.

"...other than control," she finished, throat tightening. "Not mine. Someone else's."

She expected him to offer meaningless reassurance, to tell her that of course it was different, that she had nothing to fear. But he didn't. He simply nodded, waiting for her to say more.

Lanie stared down at the dark liquid in her mug. "For a long time, I thought trust meant giving someone everything. That if you loved someone, you weren't supposed to have limits. That's what he taught me."

Archer's entire body went still.

Lanie forced herself to meet his gaze. "I know that's not how it's supposed to be. I know that now. But knowing and believing aren't always the same thing."

Archer's eyes flashed—something dark and lethal—but he didn't direct it at her.

"When did you leave him?" he asked, his voice quiet but edged in steel.

"A year ago." She swallowed hard. "I ran."

His gaze sharpened. "Is he looking for you?"

Her stomach twisted. She had told no one about the text she'd gotten the other night. She'd convinced herself it was a fluke, that if she ignored it, he'd go away. But she knew Vinnie never went away.

"I don't know," she admitted. "He let me go. Or at least, that's what I thought." She exhaled slowly. "But lately..."

Archer leaned forward, his presence so solid, so steady that she had to resist the urge to sink into it.

"Talk to me, Lanie."

She hesitated. And then, before she could stop herself, she pulled her phone from her pocket and handed it to him.

Archer took it without a word, his gaze flicking over the screen. The message from the unknown number was still there.

Miss me, baby?

A slow, controlled breath left Archer's lips. He didn't react, but she could feel the change in him.

"Did you reply?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Good." He handed the phone back to her. "You're no longer going to have to deal with this."

She gripped the phone tightly. "I don't want to be someone's problem."

Archer's eyes locked onto hers, dark and unreadable. "You're not a problem. You're mine to protect."

Her breath hitched.

Mine.

He said it like it was a fact. Like there was no arguing, no second-guessing. And for the first time in a very long time, Lanie felt something close to safe.

But safety was an illusion, and she wondered if Vinnie might be closer than she thought.

CHAPTER 5

ARCHER

Archer leaned back in his chair, fingers steeped beneath his chin, eyes locked on the glowing laptop screen. The dossier on Vinnie Molina spread across multiple tabs—recent transactions, known associates, movement patterns. It all pointed to one thing.

Molina was back in business, and more importantly, he was looking for someone.

A muscle in Archer's jaw flexed as he scanned the latest intelligence feed from Cerberus. The encrypted messages read like a goddamn horror story:

Multiple clubs in the BDSM circuit reporting missing submissives.

Pattern consistent with Master's Market grooming tactics.

Suspected involvement of Molina.

His gaze flicked to the grainy surveillance still attached to the file—Molina standing outside a bar in Chicago, deep in conversation with a man Archer recognized from past Cerberus ops. An enforcer for the Master's Market.

Archer exhaled sharply.

This wasn't just business for Molina. This was personal. His gut twisted. That meant

Lanie was in more danger than she knew.

There was a knock on the backdoor of his Greystone, which broke his focus. Archer left the counter of his kitchen island and opened the door, surprised to see Mason.

"Thought I might find you holed up here," Mason drawled, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

"Mind telling me what you're doing coming to my back door?"

"I had some news and thought you'd want to hear it firsthand."

"How'd you get in?"

"Your security system wasn't on. You locked the front gate but left the backyard gate unlocked. I let myself in. Like I said, I thought you'd want to know."

Archer suppressed the desire to groan. Mason was a sleazy pain in the ass, but he often had good intel and, sleazy or not, there was something likable about the guy.

"Go ahead."

"You missed out on a hell of a scene tonight. New sub tried to brat her way out of a scene with Dane. Didn't end well for her ass—literally."

Archer didn't bother looking up. "Not interested."

Mason let out a low chuckle, moving toward the fridge and grabbing a beer. "Figured. You've been watching her, haven't you?"

Archer finally met his gaze.

Mason smirked. "Lanie."

Archer went still.

Mason grinned around the lip of his bottle. "I've seen you with subs before, but this is different. She gets under your skin, doesn't she?"

"She's a potential target," Archer said flatly. "Molina's name has come up too many times, and now submissives are going missing."

Mason arched a brow. "Right. And that's the only reason you're fixated on her?"

Archer didn't answer.

Because the truth was... he didn't know anymore.

The first time he met Lanie, she'd been flustered, covered in sugar, and looking at him like she wanted to melt into the floor. Something about that had gotten to him. The fragility mixed with fire. The way she had run, but fought to rebuild herself.

She wasn't just some submissive. She was his, and that realization was dangerous.

Mason whistled low. "Damn. You're in deep, aren't you?"

Archer exhaled, shoving a hand through his hair. "She needs protection, Mason. She doesn't know what she's up against."

"And what happens when she does?" Mason leaned back against the counter. "You think she's gonna just let you take over her life? She's a survivor, Vaughn. Not some helpless girl playing at being submissive or waiting to be saved."

Archer's fingers curled into fists. He knew that... he knew that better than anyone.

But the second Molina's name had entered the picture, Archer had stopped thinking logically. He'd stopped strategizing and started reacting.

That wasn't who he was. That wasn't how he operated.

Mason's gaze sharpened. "What's the play here, Archer? You gonna tell her?"

Archer exhaled slowly, jaw set. "She's not ready for that. Not yet."

Mason shook his head. "Then you better figure out how much longer you can keep her in the dark. Because if Molina really is looking for her, she won't stay safe for long."

Archer didn't respond. Mason wasn't wrong, and Archer knew it. It was only a matter of time before the choice was taken from him.

Lanie's laughter drifted through the club's lounge, light and unguarded. Archer stood just inside the entrance, watching from a distance as she leaned against the counter, talking to Tessa.

She looked... comfortable. At ease in a way he hadn't seen before.

He wasn't sure how he was going to tell her it was a fantasy—a fragile moment of normalcy that was about to be ripped apart.

He forced himself to unclench his fists. She hadn't known—hadn't realized that she was standing in the center of a storm. She'd been blissfully unaware that her past was clawing its way back to her.

Archer was about to shatter her illusion of safety. He moved through the crowd with quiet purpose, his presence shifting the air as he approached. Lanie caught sight of him, her lips parting slightly.

Tessa took one look at Archer's face and muttered something about handling a delivery before slipping away.

Smart woman.

Lanie tilted her head. "You look..."

"Come with me," Archer interrupted.

Her brows knitted together. "What? Why?"

Archer didn't answer. He simply held out his hand.

Lanie hesitated, then, slowly, she placed her fingers in his. The moment their skin touched, a slow pulse of awareness rolled between them. He could feel her breath quicken. Could see the flush creeping up her neck, but she didn't pull away.

He led her through the club, past the curious stares, past the murmur of speculation. He didn't stop until they were in one of the privacy rooms, the heavy door clicking shut behind them.

Lanie crossed her arms. "Archer, what's going on? You're scaring me."

He didn't answer right away. He just looked at her, taking in the soft uncertainty in her eyes, the way she curled in on herself slightly, as if bracing for bad news.

"You trust me?" His voice was low, steady.

Lanie blinked. "I... yeah."

"Good," Archer murmured. "Because I need you to do exactly what I say from now on."

A shadow crossed her face. "What do you mean?"

Archer took a step closer. "Vinnie Molina has resurfaced here in Chicago and word is, he's looking for you."

Her breath caught. Archer saw it—the flicker of panic before she slammed the wall back into place.

"You don't know that," she said, her voice tight. "How do you know I know him?"

Archer let out a slow breath. "I kept thinking you looked familiar, but couldn't figure out where I'd seen you. I was looking at some files associated with the trafficking team. You were listed on the dark web as being available for discerning out of the country buyers. My sister is one of the ones they've abducted..."

"Oh my God, Archer, I'm so sorry, but I don't know anything."

He reached out to cup her face, and instinctively she rubbed her cheek against his palm. "I know that, sweet girl. Right now, what I need is for you to stop pretending you're safe. That's what Meri thought, and she wasn't."

Lanie shook her head, stepping back. "But he let me go. He..."

"He didn't," Archer cut in. "He was biding his time. And now, he's back."

Lanie's hands trembled. She clenched them into fists. "How do you know this?"

"Because I make it my business to know," Archer said. "And because Cerberus has been tracking him and the others behind the Master's Market."

Lanie exhaled sharply, turning away. "This isn't happening," she muttered. "I left. I ran. He wasn't supposed to..."

Archer was behind her before she could finish, his hands bracketing her hips, holding her still.

"You're not alone this time," he murmured, voice rough. "You don't have to run. Cerberus will protect you... I will protect you."

She swallowed hard.

Archer leaned in, his breath a warm whisper against her ear. "But you have to listen to me. You have to obey."

A shudder ran through her.

He tightened his grip. "You're mine to protect now, Lanie," he said, his voice pure authority. "And I don't let what's mine get taken."

Lanie turned slightly, looking up at him, her eyes dark with something more than fear.

Desire. Heat. Something deeper than either of them was ready for.

Archer held her gaze, his own pulse kicking up. He should step back, set boundaries, but he didn't. Instead, he reached out, trailing his fingers down her arm, his touch deliberate, possessive.

"You think you can follow my rules, little one?"

Lanie swallowed, her breath uneven. Then, after a long pause, she whispered, "Yes, Daddy."

And just like that, the game had changed—for both of them. No one had ever called him 'daddy' before.

Archer was halfway through his bourbon when Logan's voice crackled in his earpiece.

"Archer, you near the kitchen?"

He straightened, instantly alert. "Why?"

"Lanie's in the breakroom. Crying."

Archer was already moving. He didn't respond, didn't ask why Logan had called him instead of handling it himself. He knew why.

Because Archer was the only one Lanie would let close.

The moment he pushed through the door, he saw her. Lanie sat curled on the worn leather couch, her knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around them like she could make herself smaller. Her phone lay face-up beside her, the screen dark now, but the damage had already been done.

She flinched when she saw him, then quickly wiped at her face, trying to pretend he hadn't just caught her falling apart.

Archer didn't say a word. He walked across the room, picked up her phone, and

turned it on. The message was still there.

I see you. You can't hide forever, baby.

His grip on the device tightened, fury burning through his veins like wildfire. He was going to kill Molina.

"Did you respond?" he asked, voice low.

Lanie shook her head, her breath unsteady. "No. I turned it off. I thought..." She swallowed hard. "I thought if I ignored it, he'd stop."

Archer exhaled slowly, forcing himself to stay calm. "He won't."

Her lower lip trembled. And damn it, that was all it took.

Archer sank onto the couch beside her, lifting a hand to her chin. "Eyes on me, little one."

She hesitated, then obeyed. That was trust. Not complete, but enough for now.

"I need you to listen," he said, his grip firm but gentle. "You're not alone in this. You don't have to fight him on your own."

Her breath hitched. "But I don't want to be a problem..."

Archer's jaw clenched. "You're not."

She looked away. Archer let go of her chin and slid a hand beneath her knees, another behind her back, lifting her into his lap before she could protest. She gasped, stiffening.

“Archer...”

“Hush,” he murmured, holding her close. “You need this. Let me give it to you.”

She let out a shaky breath. “You don’t have to...”

“I take care of what’s mine.”

The words hung between them, leaving little space for air. Lanie inhaled sharply, and when she finally relaxed, he knew she’d stopped fighting it. Archer ran a slow hand up and down her back, soothing, steady. Her body was warm against his, soft where he was hard, fragile where he was unyielding.

She wasn’t just any sub; she was his. The realization sank deep, a permanent mark on his soul.

“Molina doesn’t get to scare you,” Archer murmured against her temple. “Not while I’m here.”

Her fingers curled into his shirt. “I don’t know how to stop being afraid.”

“You don’t have to.” Archer pressed a firm kiss to her hair, his voice raw with promise. “That’s my job.”

Archer held her close for a long moment, letting the quiet between them settle. He could feel the steady rhythm of her breath against him, the faint tremor still lingering in her limbs. She wasn’t ready to talk yet, and that was fine. He could be patient.

But patience didn’t mean inaction.

With one last reassuring squeeze, he pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. “Come

on, little one,” he murmured, his voice low but firm. “Time to go.”

She nodded, her fingers untangling from his shirt, and without another word, he guided her toward the exit.

Archer kept a firm hand on Lanie’s lower back as he guided her through the rear entrance and down into the secure parking lot. The evening air was crisp, bordering on frigid.

“You’re not taking the bus home,” he stated.

Lanie stiffened. “I don’t...”

“Not a debate,” Archer cut in.

She exhaled, shaking her head. “You’re overreacting.”

Archer stopped, turning her to face him. “Someone associated with a known trafficking ring just threatened you. If you think I’m going to let you walk out of here alone, you don’t know me at all.”

Her breath stuttered. “I...”

“Get in the Range Rover, Lanie.”

There was no room for argument.

Her lips parted slightly, but she obeyed, slipping into the passenger seat of his sleek black SUV. Archer shut the door behind her, then rounded to the driver’s side, sliding in with controlled precision.

The moment the doors closed, the energy inside the vehicle changed.

Confined. Intimate. Charged.

Lanie fidgeted with the hem of her dress, her bare thigh shifting against the leather seat. Archer's gaze flickered down, his fingers tightening around the wheel.

"Seatbelt."

She startled slightly before reaching for it. He caught the strap before she could pull it across her body, his knuckles grazing her collarbone as he clicked it into place himself.

Lanie's breath hitched.

"Archer..."

He tilted her chin up, making sure she saw exactly what she did to him. "Do you want to test me, little one?"

Her pupils dilated. "No, Sir."

Damn right.

Archer let go and started the engine, forcing himself to focus. The drive was silent, the air thick with something neither of them dared name. When he pulled up in front of her apartment, Lanie shifted, clearly unsure how to break the moment between them.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Archer reached across her, popping open the glove compartment. “Take this.”

She frowned as he handed her a small, sleek phone. “What’s this?”

“A secured line,” he said. “Molina won’t be able to trace it.”

Her throat worked as she swallowed. “You really think he’s that close?”

Archer’s voice was steel. “I know he is.”

Lanie exhaled. “What if I don’t want to live in fear?”

Archer leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. “Then let me handle it.”

She shivered. “That’s not fair.”

“Nothing about this is fair,” Archer murmured, his fingers trailing up her arm, slow and deliberate. “But I protect what’s mine. And right now, you’re mine.”

Her lips parted, but he didn’t give her the chance to argue.

“Inside,” he ordered.

Lanie hesitated, then nodded, slipping out of the car without another word.

Archer watched her run up the steps, use her key to open the outer door and disappear inside.

Then, with calculated precision, he pulled out his phone.

“Reyna.”

A beat. Then a sharp, alert voice answered. “Yeah?”

“I need eyes on Lanie’s place.”

Another pause. “You expecting trouble?”

Archer’s jaw tightened. “It’s already here.”

Reyna exhaled. “Got it. I’ll post up nearby.”

Archer ended the call.

Molina was getting closer.

And Archer was about to make sure he never got close enough.

CHAPTER 6

LANIE

Lanie stared at the message on her phone for the fifth time that morning.

Private session upstairs. Second door on the right. Midnight. Your choice, little one.
Archer

She chewed her bottom lip, heat curling in her stomach. Her choice. No pressure, no demands. Just an open door to something unknown. Something terrifying. Something she wanted more than she should. She'd worked at the club long enough to know at least a smattering about the dynamics between Doms and their subs. A part of her had sworn she'd never submit to anyone again, but Archer wasn't just anyone. He was the kind of man she'd never allowed herself to even dream about.

Her fingers hovered over the screen. She could say no. Archer would accept that without question. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that she wanted to say yes. She let out a slow breath and typed her response.

Okay.

Her heart raced as soon as she hit send. There was no taking it back now.

Midnight arrived too fast.

Lanie stood outside the private playroom, still not sure if she could go through with

it. The hallway was quiet, the heavy door in front of her an imposing barrier between her past and whatever came next. She wasn't sure if she was ready. Her body hummed with nervous energy, torn between anticipation and doubt.

A memory flashed—Vinnie's voice, slick with control. You trust me, don't you, baby?

Her stomach twisted. This wasn't the same. Archer wasn't Vinnie. Lanie reached for the doorknob before she could talk herself out of it. She found the door unlocked and stepped inside.

The room was dimly lit, a warm glow casting long shadows over the dark leather furniture. The air smelled of fresh rain and something unmistakably Archer.

He stood in the center of the room, arms crossed, waiting.

"Right on time," he said, voice smooth as silk.

Lanie exhaled shakily. "I almost didn't come."

"But you did."

She nodded.

His gaze softened just a fraction. "Good girl."

The praise settled deep, warming something inside her that had been cold for too long.

"Take off your shoes," Archer ordered.

Lanie hesitated, then toed them off, her socked feet sinking into the plush rug beneath her.

"Come here."

She moved without thinking, stopping just in front of him.

"Hands behind your back."

She laced her fingers together, breath coming faster.

Archer lifted her chin with two fingers, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Are you here because you want this, Lanie? Or because you feel like you have to be?"

His tone was steady, patient.

Lanie swallowed hard. "I... I don't know."

"Honest. That's good; then let's figure it out together."

He let go of her chin and stepped back, his presence still an undeniable force.

"We're going to start with something simple," Archer said. "Discipline. Not because you've done something wrong, but because I need you to understand the difference between punishment and control."

Her pulse pounded.

"Has anyone ever spanked you before?" he asked.

Heat flooded her face.

"Not like this," she admitted.

"Then let's change that."

Archer moved to the leather chair against the wall and sat down, his long legs stretching out as he patted his thigh.

Lanie's stomach flipped.

"You're going to lie over my lap, little one," Archer said, his voice firm but gentle. "I want you to feel the discipline, but I also want you to understand that you're safe. You say 'yellow' if you need me to slow down. 'Red' if you need to stop."

Her fingers curled into fists.

"You trust me?" he asked.

She inhaled shakily. "Yes."

"Then come here."

Lanie stepped forward, her knees nearly brushing his.

Archer reached for her wrist, gently but firmly guiding her until she lay draped across his lap.

Her breathing was uneven, her heartbeat a wild drum against her ribs. She felt the heat of him through her dress, the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath her. She settled herself, finding that holding onto his ankle made her feel more secure.

"Relax," he murmured. He flipped the hem of her dress up over her back. "Since this

is your first time, I'm going to let you leave your panties on. In the future, spankings will be done on the bare."

She exhaled slowly, hoping he remained unaware of how frantically the butterflies in her stomach were fluttering, as if someone had dosed them with crack.

The first slap landed softly, more of a tease than anything.

Lanie tensed, waiting.

"Shh," Archer soothed. "You can take more than that."

The second slap came harder. A sharp sting that faded into warmth.

Her breath caught.

Again.

And again.

Each strike was deliberate, controlled, a rhythm that built heat low in her belly. It hurt—but not in the way she feared. It was grounding. Centering.

By the fifth slap, her body had melted against his, her fingers unclenching.

"That's it," Archer murmured, his palm smoothing over the curve of her ass, easing the burn. "Good girl."

A shiver ran through her at those words.

Archer continued, alternating between firm slaps and slow, soothing strokes. Her

breathing evened out, something inside her shifting, loosening.

She wasn't waiting for the pain to become something cruel. She wasn't bracing for it to go too far. Because it wouldn't. Archer wouldn't let it.

Tears pricked at her eyes. It was the first time in years she had felt this way.

Safe.

Archer stilled, his fingers tracing over the curve of her hip. "Talk to me, little one."

Lanie inhaled, her chest tight. "I..." She swallowed. "I didn't know it could feel like this."

Archer's grip tightened, just for a second. "Like what?"

"Like you care," she admitted.

Silence stretched between them. Then, carefully, Archer eased her upright, shifting her so she straddled his lap, her knees on either side of his thighs.

His hands came up to cradle her face, thumbs brushing away the stray tears that had slipped free.

"I will never take more than you want to give, Lanie," he murmured. "And I will never let anyone else take from you, either."

A sob caught in her throat, but she held his gaze, letting his words sink in, letting herself believe them.

Archer leaned in, his lips brushing her temple, his breath warm against her skin.

"You're not alone anymore."

Lanie exhaled, sinking against him, her fingers curling into his shirt. For the first time in a long time, she believed that might be true.

Lanie had no idea why she had agreed to this.

She sat curled on the leather couch in one of the private lounges at Club Southside, knees drawn up, hands twisted together in her lap. The low lighting softened the room's edges, but it did nothing to calm the flutter of nerves in her stomach.

Because Archer was watching her.

He stood across the room, leaning against the bar, his presence as steady as ever. He didn't rush her, didn't press. He simply waited .

That was the thing about him. He was patient. Confident. Unshakable.

And she had no idea how to handle that.

"You're thinking too hard," Archer finally said, voice a quiet command.

Lanie exhaled, shifting slightly. "Maybe."

"Not maybe." His eyes locked on hers, dark and unreadable. "You are."

She bit her lip. "I just—this is... different for me."

"I know." He pushed off the bar, his steps slow and deliberate as he moved toward her. He stopped just in front of the couch, looming over her, but not in a way that made her want to shrink.

In a way that made her want to stay .

"Come here, little one."

The words sent a shiver down her spine.

Lanie hesitated. "I don't..."

"That wasn't a request."

Her breath hitched.

Archer didn't need to raise his voice. He didn't need to force her. His presence alone, the sheer authority in the way he held himself, was enough.

Slowly, carefully, she unfolded herself from the couch.

Archer took her hand, guiding her between his knees as he sank onto the couch. His grip was firm but gentle, grounding her.

"You don't have to be strong all the time," he murmured.

Lanie swallowed hard. "I don't know how to be anything else."

His fingers traced the inside of her wrist, a slow, steady rhythm. "Then I'll teach you."

Her pulse fluttered beneath his touch.

"Submission isn't weakness, little one," Archer continued. "It's knowing who to trust. Knowing when to let go."

She forced out a shaky breath. "I don't know if I can."

"You can ," Archer corrected. "You just haven't had the right reason to yet."

She looked up at him, caught in his unwavering gaze. He was so sure.

And damn it, part of her wanted to believe him.

But then her phone buzzed.

Lanie startled, the moment shattering around her. She fumbled in her pocket, pulling it out.

One new message from an unknown number. Her stomach clenched as she tapped it open. A photo appeared—Lanie entering the club. The timestamp was fresh. Beneath the image, a message.

See you soon, baby.

Ice crawled through her veins. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The phone slipped from her fingers, hitting the floor with a soft thud .

Archer was moving before she even registered it.

"Lanie." His voice snapped her back.

She looked up, barely aware that she was trembling.

His hands were on her shoulders now, steadying her. "Talk to me."

She couldn't. The words stuck in her throat.

Archer's jaw tightened. He picked up the phone, his grip turning white-knuckled the second he saw the screen. The change in him was instant—controlled fury, lethal.

He exhaled slowly, like a man barely holding something violent at bay.

"Where's your bag?"

Lanie blinked, confused. "What?"

"Your bag, Lanie." His voice was firm. Unyielding.

She pointed to the chair where she'd left it.

Archer grabbed it, shoved the phone inside, then stood. "We're leaving."

Her heart kicked against her ribs. "What? Why? I can't just..."

"You can ," he corrected. " You will. "

Lanie forced a breath. "Archer, I..."

"Enough."

The word silenced whatever weak argument she had left.

Archer softened just slightly, his palm brushing the side of her face. "You don't have to fight this alone, little one."

A sharp lump formed in her throat.

For so long, she had been alone. Even when she wasn't, it had felt that way.

But not now. Not with him.

She inhaled, shaky but steadying. "Okay," she whispered.

Archer's gaze darkened, something dangerous flickering beneath the surface.

Molina had made a mistake, and Archer was about to make damn sure he never got the chance to make another one.

Lanie pressed her forehead against the cool window of Archer's SUV, her breath fogging the glass as the city lights blurred past. Her pulse had slowed from the initial spike of panic, but the lingering chill of fear clung to her skin. The weight of what had just happened—the message, the picture, the undeniable proof that Molina was watching her—pressed down on her chest like an invisible hand.

Archer hadn't spoken much since they'd left the club. He didn't need to. His presence filled the vehicle, steady and unwavering, a silent promise of protection. His hands gripped the wheel, knuckles flexing every so often like he was barely holding himself in check.

The ride felt too short and too long at the same time, and before she knew it, he was pulling up in front of her apartment building.

Archer killed the engine but didn't move. "Inside. I'll be right behind you."

Lanie's fingers curled around the door handle. She hesitated, looking at him. "You don't have to..."

"Don't finish that sentence." His voice was pure steel.

She swallowed hard and nodded, pushing the door open. The cold night air bit at her

skin as she stepped out, but she barely registered it. Every hair on her body stood on end, hyper-aware of the darkened alleyways, the flickering streetlamp overhead, the shadowed doorways. She'd walked this route a hundred times before. It had never felt this dangerous.

Archer was at her side in an instant, his presence a solid, commanding force. His hand landed at the small of her back, guiding her up the steps and toward the front entrance.

Lanie fumbled for her keys with trembling fingers. The moment she slid the key into the lock, Archer reached past her, pushing the door open first. He stepped inside before she could protest, scanning the dimly lit hallway like a predator scenting the air.

"Stay behind me," he murmured as he pulled her into the hallway, locked the door behind them and stood her against it.

Lanie obeyed, hovering in the doorway as he moved through her apartment. He checked the locks on the windows, opened every closet, and even pulled the shower curtain back in the bathroom. When he reached her bedroom, he paused, his gaze flicking over her space—a small, neatly made bed, a few scattered books on the nightstand, and the oversized sweater she'd left draped across the chair.

His jaw flexed as he turned back to her. "It's clear. But I'm not leaving you here alone."

Her stomach flipped. "Archer..."

"You're not safe here, Lanie." His voice softened, but the command in it remained. "Pack what you need. You're coming with me."

She wanted to argue. To tell him she wasn't some fragile thing that needed protecting. But the words wouldn't come. Because deep down, she knew he was right.

Archer's expression didn't change, but something flickered in his gaze—approval, maybe. Or something darker. As she moved toward her closet, she could still feel his eyes on her, watching, waiting, protecting.

CHAPTER 7

ARCHER

Archer gripped Lanie's phone so tightly he was half a second away from snapping it in half. The photo on the screen burned into his mind—Lanie, captured in real-time as she entered the club. The timestamp was fresh.

Molina had eyes on her.

Archer forced himself to take a slow, controlled breath. The room felt too small, the air too thick with the scent of Lanie's fear.

She stood frozen in front of him, her hands wrapped around her arms as if she could hold herself together. Her wide, dark eyes locked onto his, searching for something—reassurance, maybe. Safety.

She was looking to him for that.

"You're not staying here," he repeated, his tone leaving no room for debate.

Her brows pulled together. "Archer, I..."

He closed the space between them in two steps, cradling her jaw in his rough palm, tilting her chin up so she had no choice but to look at him. "This isn't a request, little one. Pack anything you need. Clothes, personal items. You're not coming back here until this is over."

Lanie bit her lip. “And if I say no?”

His jaw clenched. He stepped closer, looming over her, his voice low and deliberate. “Then I throw you over my shoulder and carry you out.”

Her breath hitched. Heat flared in her eyes, warring with frustration. “That’s not fair.”

Archer’s lips quirked. “You’re damn right it isn’t. Now move, little one.”

She’s done this before. Run. Hidden. Not anymore.

She trembled slightly, but not from fear. He could feel it—the pulse racing beneath her skin, the way her breath came faster. She was overwhelmed, shaken, but she trusted him. That trust was a fragile thing, and he’d be damned if he let anything happen to her.

“Lanie,” he said, voice quieter now, though no less firm. “Molina isn’t just watching. He’s closing in. I’m not going to let him get close enough to take you.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “I...”

“I’ll handle him.” The words were a promise. A vow.

Lanie inhaled shakily, her hands still clenched into fists.

“Pack a bag,” he repeated, voice softening just slightly. “You’re coming home with me.”

She didn’t argue this time. Instead, she disappeared into her bedroom. He listened to the quiet shuffle of her movements, the way she moved with a quiet efficiency that told him she knew how to leave without a trace.

Archer took the moment to pull out his secure line and dial Reyna.

She picked up on the first ring. “Tell me you’ve got eyes on her place.”

“I do,” Reyna said. “No signs of anyone yet, but that message? It means someone’s been watching.”

Archer clenched his jaw. “I want a full security sweep of the block. Check for cameras, blind spots, anything Molina’s men could be using to track her movements.”

“Already on it,” Reyna confirmed. “But you should know—Cerberus just flagged something else. King called me directly.”

Archer’s gut tightened. “What is it?”

Reyna hesitated. “Molina might be using Club Southside.”

His entire body went still.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Reyna let out a slow breath. “We intercepted a message in one of the encrypted channels used by the Master’s Market recruiters. Someone inside the club has been feeding them names. Specifically, submissives who fit their preferred profile.”

Archer’s grip on the phone turned lethal.

“They’re scouting,” Reyna continued. “And Lanie? She fits the profile perfectly.”

Fire ignited in Archer’s blood.

He was done playing defense.

“Shut it down,” he ordered. “No one else gets taken.”

“Already done,” Reyna said.

Archer ended the call just as Lanie stepped back into the room, a small overnight bag slung over her shoulder.

She hesitated at the sight of his expression. “What happened?”

Archer took the bag from her, slinging it over his own shoulder before grabbing her hand. “We’re leaving. Now.”

Lanie didn’t fight him, but she dug her heels in enough to slow him down. “Archer. Tell me.”

He exhaled hard, turning to face her. “Someone inside the club is feeding information to the Master’s Market. They’re targeting submissives.” His voice dropped lower. “Targeting you.”

Her face drained of color. “No...”

“Yes.” Archer’s grip tightened on her hand. “That means no more arguments. No more pretending this isn’t happening. You stay with me.”

Lanie shivered, her gaze flickering away. “I don’t want to put you in danger.”

A deep, rough chuckle rumbled from his chest, humorless. “You think I give a damn about that?” He reached up, cupping her face. “You’re mine to protect, little one,” he said, his hand gently cupping her face, his touch both reassuring and possessive.

Her lips parted, but whatever protest she had died before it reached her tongue.

Because she felt it too. There was something between them—the way his dominance pulled at her submission—it was something she'd never felt before.

After a moment, she let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

Archer brushed his thumb along her cheek, then took her hand again. “Let's go.”

By the time they arrived at Archer's place, it was late.

Lanie stepped into his Greystone, eyes flicking around as if she was trying to piece together who he was from the surrounding space.

He watched her closely, waiting for any signs of discomfort, but she exhaled, shoulders relaxing just a little.

That was good.

She needed to feel safe here.

“Come on.” He guided her inside, locking the door behind them and activating the security system.

“Archer...” Lanie hesitated in the foyer, shifting her bag from one hand to the other. “Thank you.”

He exhaled, raking a hand through his hair. “You don't need to thank me, Lanie.”

She took a step closer, something unreadable in her expression. “I do.”

Archer stilled as she reached out, pressing a small, uncertain hand against his chest. His pulse kicked up, but he ignored it. Leading her upstairs, he stopped outside the guest room before opening the door and setting her bag down inside. "You'll stay here. Door locks from the inside."

Lanie hesitated. "Where will you be?"

"Across the hall," he said, his gaze darkening. "And I'll know the second anyone gets too close." With a slight tilt of his head, he added, "Come on, let's head back downstairs."

He led the way to the main floor, showing her around, making her comfortable and ensuring she knew how to get out safely in case there was an emergency. She sat on the couch looking at him. She let out a slow breath, searching his face for something—maybe reassurance. Archer leaned against the mantle, arms folded, watching her with narrowed eyes.

"I need you to remain inside. While the yard and surrounding neighborhood should be safe, I won't risk something happening to you."

Lanie came up off the couch and stomped her foot—it was kind of adorable—frustration burning in her dark eyes. "I've spent too much of my life being controlled, Archer. I won't do it again."

Archer exhaled slowly, deliberately. "This isn't about control, little one. It's about keeping you safe. You're in danger and you're going to do as you're told, so I can keep you out of the hands of those who would harm you."

Archer pushed off the mantle, closing the space between them in two slow, deliberate steps. Lanie stiffened but held her ground. He reached down, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. She sucked in a breath at the contact, and he didn't miss the way her

pulse quickened at her throat.

"This isn't about control," he murmured, his voice low. "This is about protection. There is a difference."

Her lips parted slightly, but she didn't speak. Didn't step away either.

Archer tilted her chin up, his thumb tracing the soft curve of her jaw. "Tell me you don't feel safer with me here."

Lanie swallowed hard, her eyes locked on his. For a long, charged moment, neither of them moved. His gaze dipped to her mouth, and he could see the way her body leaned into his without realizing it.

But then, at the last second, she turned her head away, stepping back. "I need air," she muttered, rubbing her hands down her arms.

"Stay inside," he said, letting her go.

She harrumphed at him and then all but stomped up the stairs. Archer grinned. Lanie had a bit of the brat in her. That was fine with him. He'd tamed brats before.

Archer stared at the encrypted message glowing on his laptop screen, his gut twisting.

Someone inside Cerberus or the club is feeding Molina intel.

Reyna's words echoed in his head from earlier that night. 'Whoever it is, they're good,' she'd told him over the secured line. 'They're covering their tracks, but I caught a pattern—classified information is being leaked. Someone inside our ranks is playing both sides.'

Archer dragged a hand through his hair. A traitor inside their ranks—shit! Whether it was Cerberus itself or the club didn't matter. Cerberus had existed for so many years without a mole or any kind of leak, and now it appeared they were coming out of the woodwork. As for the club, part of its stock and trade was discretion.

He clenched his jaw, his mind racing through the possibilities. Cerberus maintained a tight operation; they carefully vetted and trained their people in counterintelligence. How had they missed this? Who was it, but more importantly, how were they going to shut him or her down?

If someone was leaking information to Molina, that meant they wanted him to succeed. Which meant Lanie was in even more danger than he thought.

His phone buzzed.

He grabbed it without hesitation. "Talk to me."

"It's Reyna." Her voice was clipped, urgent. "We got something big."

Archer straightened. "Go."

"A deal's going down at the Velvet Glove," she said. "An auction. Invitation-only. High roller clientele."

His blood ran cold.

"When?"

"Masquerade party this weekend," Reyna said. "It's the perfect cover. The club's hosting a private event at an estate—Molina's people are using it to move new merchandise."

Archer's grip on the phone tightened. "Tell me we have an in."

"Already working on it," Reyna assured him. "King's pulling strings to get you inside as a buyer."

Archer exhaled. He hated playing this game, but if it got him closer to Molina, to whoever was leaking intel—to keeping Lanie safe—he'd do whatever it took.

His gaze flicked toward the guest room, where Lanie was sleeping, blissfully unaware of what was coming.

That was about to change.

CHAPTER 8

LANIE

Lanie's heart pounded as she stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror in the walk-in closet of the room Archer had given her. It was off the luxurious bath attached to her room. She sure as hell didn't look like a victim. Not tonight.

The deep emerald-green dress clung to her curves, the silky material pooling at her ankles. The plunging neckline left little to the imagination, the open back daring in a way she'd never allowed herself before. A delicate mask, edged in black lace, concealed the upper half of her face, adding a touch of mystery.

This was her choice. She was done hiding. The click of the door opening behind her sent a shiver down her spine. She didn't need to turn around to know it was Archer. The air changed when he entered a room—thicker, charged with something that made her stomach flip in the most delicious way.

He didn't speak right away. He didn't have to. She felt his gaze trailing over her exposed skin, dark and unrelenting.

Lanie inhaled deeply, turning to face him. "Well?"

Archer stood just inside the doorway, dressed in a sleek black suit that fit his powerful frame perfectly. His mask was simple—black, edged with silver—but it did nothing to soften the raw dominance radiating from him.

His jaw was tight, his blue eyes burning as he raked his gaze over her.

"Change," he ordered.

Lanie's lips parted. "Excuse me?"

Archer closed the distance between them in three slow steps, his sheer presence making her pulse skitter. "That dress is too revealing."

She arched a brow, tilting her chin. "I like this dress. Reyna got it for me."

Archer's fingers curled under her chin, lifting it higher. "I don't care."

Heat coiled low in her belly. She wanted to fight him on this. Wanted to tell him he had no right to dictate what she wore.

But the way he was looking at her? Possessive. Furious. Like he was one breath away from throwing her over his shoulder and locking her away where no one else could see her. Heat coiled in her lower regions. There was a part of Archer that made everything go all gooey inside. It made her stomach tighten in ways she didn't want to analyze.

Lanie swallowed hard, forcing herself to hold his gaze. "I'm going to this party, Archer. With or without you."

His grip tightened slightly. "You think I'm going to let you walk into a den of predators dressed like that, looking like this?"

"I think you don't own me, and that the rest of the team thought this was the best way to draw Vinnie out."

Archer exhaled sharply through his nose, his nostrils flaring. For a long moment, they stood locked in a silent battle. Then, suddenly, he smiled. Slow. Dark. Dangerous. Lanie's stomach dropped.

"You want to play, little one?" Archer murmured. "Fine. But you'll play by my rules."

Before she could react, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the shadows of the room's alcove.

The world tilted as she found herself pressed up against the wall, her back against the cool, polished wooden panel, Archer's heat surrounding her.

Her breath caught.

"Let me be very clear," Archer said, his voice a deep growl. "If you walk into that party looking like this, every man there will want you."

Lanie's breath came faster, her skin prickling with awareness.

"And that," Archer murmured, brushing his lips over the shell of her ear, "is a problem . "

Lanie's fingers curled into fists at her sides. "You can't scare me into staying behind."

Archer's hand skimmed down her side, slow, deliberate. "No, but I can remind you who you belong to."

Her pulse pounded. She should fight him on this. Should tell him she didn't belong to anyone. But the way he was touching her? The way he was speaking to her? Made

her want to belong to him—not just for this op, but forever. She wanted to hear him say it again.

Archer reached into his pocket and pulled out a silk ribbon.

Lanie's stomach flipped.

"Hands up," he ordered.

Her breath hitched. "What?"

Archer's gaze locked onto hers. "Now."

A thrill ran through her. Slowly, she lifted her hands, presenting them to him as requested—no, scratch that, ordered..

Archer took his time, wrapping the silk around her wrists, knotting it with precise, practiced skill. Not too tight. Not painful. But enough to make her feel it.

"Good girl," he murmured.

Lanie shivered. She wondered if he had any idea what those two words did to her. He stepped closer, his body pressing against hers, the hard lines of his chest flush against her softer curves.

"You like this," he murmured, dragging his nose along the curve of her throat.

She swallowed hard. "I..."

Archer's fingers ghosted over her hip, teasing, taunting. "I could make you beg," he mused. "Right here. Right now."

Lanie sucked in a sharp breath. He was right, he could. Her body ached for him. For his touch. For more.

Instead, he leaned in and whispered against her lips, "Behave tonight, little one, or there will be consequences—painful ones."

Then, just as quickly as he'd bound her, he untied the silk, letting it slide through his fingers. Lanie nearly whimpered .

She sucked in a sharp breath, struggling to regain control. "That was... unfair."

Archer's lips quirked. "No, that was a warning."

He lifted the silk ribbon, tucking it into the pocket of his suit jacket, like a promise, a reminder.

Lanie's entire body burned.

Archer stepped back, adjusting his cuffs like he hadn't just turned her into a quivering mess.

"You ready?" he asked casually.

Lanie exhaled hard. "I hate you."

Archer chuckled. "No, you don't."

She scowled, but she still took his arm when he offered it. And as they stepped into the night, Lanie realized something terrifying—she might have just stepped into the lion's den.

But the real danger? Was the man walking beside her.

Lanie stepped deeper into the masquerade, her pulse a steady thrum beneath her skin. The ballroom was alive with energy—bodies pressed together in close conversation, the sound of laughter and music blending into a hypnotic hum. The air smelled of expensive cologne, perfume, and something darker, something more dangerous lurking just beneath the surface.

She forced herself to breathe.

She wasn't a victim. Not tonight.

Her emerald gown shimmered under the soft lighting, the thin silk molding to her curves in a way that made her skin heat under Archer's gaze. The man hadn't let her out of his sight since they'd arrived, his possessiveness simmering just below the surface.

And part of her liked it.

She felt his hand at the small of her back, guiding her through the room like he owned her, and the way her body responded told her that maybe she wanted him to. But she couldn't think about that now.

Because she'd just seen him. Lanie's stomach lurched. Vinnie. He was here.

He stood near the edge of the room, half in the shadows, watching her. His mask obscured most of his face, but she didn't need to see it to know.

The way he held himself. The way he leaned casually against a marble pillar, completely at ease, like he belonged here.

Like he wasn't a monster.

Her fingers clenched into fists. She couldn't fall apart now. Not in front of Archer. Not when she was supposed to be proving to herself that she was stronger than this.

Lanie swallowed hard, forcing herself to keep moving. She could feel Archer's gaze on her, assessing, measuring. He knew something was wrong, but he hadn't called her on it. Yet.

"Champagne?" A waiter appeared beside them, balancing a tray of crystal flutes.

Lanie nodded quickly, grabbing a glass. She took a sip, hoping the cool liquid would calm the rising panic in her chest.

It didn't.

"Talk to me, little one."

Her breath caught at Archer's deep murmur, his voice a quiet command against her ear.

She turned slightly, meeting his gaze through the delicate lace of her mask. "I'm fine," she lied.

His jaw flexed. "Don't lie to me. From this point forward, if you lie to me, there will be consequences."

She hated lying to him, but there was a part of her that now wanted to lie to him so she could experience those consequences. She wanted to experience being put over Archer's knee, having those powerful hands deliver his discipline. She wanted to know someone cared enough about her to discipline her. But more than that, she

wanted to know what it felt like to have Archer drive his cock into her so that she screamed as she came. The thought made her whole body tremble.

But if she told him now—if she let even a hint of fear slip past her lips—he would tear through this room and rip Vinnie apart. And that was exactly what Vinnie wanted. For her to make a scene. Vinnie would think he was still in control—only he wasn't.

Archer studied her for a long moment, the intensity of his stare making the butterflies in her belly that had been fluttering around take flight. Finally, he reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. His fingers lingered, trailing down the delicate column of her throat before settling at the curve of her jaw.

"You're lying," he murmured.

Her breath hitched. "I'm fine," she repeated, more firmly this time.

Archer's eyes darkened, his grip tightening ever so slightly as he raised an eyebrow. "Another lie. That's five when we get home. I suppose you'll tell me when you're ready," he said. "But understand this, little one—nothing happens to you tonight. Nothing . "

A shiver rolled through her. Before she could respond, a familiar chime buzzed from her clutch. Her stomach dropped.

Slowly, her fingers curled around her phone. She cast Archer a quick glance, then turned slightly away, just enough to shield the screen as she unlocked it.

A new message. No number. Just two words.

Leave. Now.

Lanie's throat tightened. Her hands shook. Then another message appeared.

Or else.

A wave of nausea hit her. She felt it—the sharp stab of helplessness creeping up her spine, wrapping tight around her throat like a vice.

No. Not again.

Lanie forced herself to lift her gaze, scanning the room. Vinnie was gone. Her pulse pounded. Where was he? What did he mean? Her grip on the phone tightened, her breathing uneven.

"Lanie."

Archer's voice. Low. Controlled.

She swallowed hard, locking the screen before slowly turning to face him.

"Yeah?"

His blue eyes burned into her. "You're shaking."

Damn it. She had to pull it together.

Lanie forced a smile, slipping the phone back into her clutch. "It's nothing," she said lightly. "Just the champagne. I probably should've eaten more."

Archer didn't move. Didn't blink. The air between them thickened, charged with something heavy.

Then, after a long, excruciating beat, he nodded once.

"That's five more." He murmured. "Stay close."

Lanie nodded, as shivers ran up and down her spine. Her fingers curled around his arm as he led her deeper into the masquerade. She pasted a polite smile on her face, willed herself to breathe, to pretend.

But inside? Inside, she was screaming. Because Vinnie was here.

And he was waiting for her to make a mistake.

CHAPTER 9

ARCHER

Archer watched the shift in Lanie's expression, the moment her defiance faltered, just for a second. It was all the confirmation he needed.

She was hiding something.

From the second they stepped into the masquerade, Archer had felt something was off. Now he was certain she was hiding something. While he understood why she had developed some of her bad habits, it was his job to correct them. She didn't have any real tells unless you knew her, and he did. It was in the way she held herself too rigid, the way her fingers trembled against his arm, the way she avoided his eyes when she thought he wasn't paying attention.

The problem for her was, he was always paying attention.

Lanie tried to slip past him, but his grip was firm as he caught her elbow, pulling her back against him. Her pulse pounded against his fingers, her breath coming fast. She smelled of vanilla and something darker—fear, adrenaline, the sharp scent of nerves.

"Talk to me," he ordered.

She shook her head, her eyes darting toward the crowd, toward the VIP section upstairs. The main staircase leading up was at the far end of the ballroom, roped off and hidden behind heavy velvet curtains.

That was all it took. His entire body went stiff.

Archer bent his head, his mouth brushing her ear. "Is he here?"

Lanie flinched.

A low growl built in his chest. "Don't lie to me again, little one."

She swallowed hard, still trying to force composure. "I don't know," she whispered. "I..."

"Lanie." His grip moved from her elbow to her chin—gentle but firm—forcing her to look at him. Her pupils were too wide, her lips parted as she fought for air. "You saw him."

A flicker of fear flashed across her face before she forced it down, her fingers curling into her palm. She nodded, finally admitting, "Yes."

Every muscle in Archer's body went tight. "When?"

"Earlier." Her voice was barely audible over the hum of the crowd. "By the bar. I turned around, and he was just... watching me. Like he was waiting."

Archer forced himself to breathe, to rein in the anger clawing at his chest. This wasn't the time to lose control. He had to think, had to focus.

His earpiece buzzed with static.

"Archer," Reyna's voice came through, sharp and urgent. "We've got confirmation—Molina's in one of the VIP suites upstairs. And he's not alone."

Archer's gut twisted. "How many?"

"Four men with him. He's got a laptop running, which means he's probably communicating with buyers."

"Victims?" His voice dropped into something lethal.

A pause. "We're working on it, but yeah. We think there are at least three girls up there being prepped."

Archer exhaled slowly, the rage in his veins running white-hot. This wasn't just about Lanie anymore.

"Keep your eyes on them," he ordered. "I'll be up soon."

"Copy that."

He tapped his earpiece off and turned back to Lanie. She was watching him, her chest rising and falling too fast, her lips pressed together like she was bracing for what came next.

"You're leaving," he told her.

Lanie stiffened. "What?"

"You're going home."

"No."

Archer arched a brow, tilting his head. "That wasn't a request."

Her jaw tightened. "I'm not running anymore, Archer. Not from him."

A muscle flexed in his cheek. "This isn't running. This is retreating to a safe place, so you survive."

Lanie crossed her arms, frustration burning in her dark eyes. "And what if I don't want to survive like that? What if I want to fight?"

Archer took a slow, measured breath. He wanted to shake her, to make her understand just how dangerous this was, and that it was his job to protect her. But she was looking at him with something fierce in her gaze—determination, defiance.

She wasn't just scared. She was furious. And damn it, he respected that... but that didn't mean he was letting her stay.

Archer stepped forward, backing her against the nearest pillar, caging her in with his body. "Listen to me, little one," he murmured, his voice low, dark. "You don't get to argue with me about this. Not when it comes to your safety."

Her breath hitched, but she didn't look away. "I'm not yours to control, Archer."

Something dangerous flickered in his gaze. He reached down, brushing his fingers along the curve of her throat, feeling her pulse flutter beneath his touch. "Aren't you?"

Lanie's lips parted, a shiver rolling through her body. "You don't own me."

Archer let his hand drift lower, tracing the delicate lace of her mask, the smooth line of her collarbone. "I own your safety, little one," he said softly. "And right now, that means getting you the hell out of here."

Lanie swallowed hard, but she didn't argue.

"Mitch is waiting in the alley with a car," he continued. "You'll go straight to my place. I'll have people stationed outside. You don't open the door for anyone but me, Reyna, or Logan. Understood?"

She hesitated, her fingers twitching at her sides. He knew what this cost her. He knew how much she hated feeling powerless. But this wasn't about control. This was about keeping her alive. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Lanie exhaled and gave a single nod.

Archer leaned in, pressing a firm kiss to her forehead. "Good girl."

She shivered.

He pulled back just enough to meet her eyes. "Go. Now."

Lanie hesitated one last time, then turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowd.

Archer didn't move. Didn't breathe until he saw Logan guiding her out of the ballroom, her green dress vanishing through the exit.

Only then did he let himself focus on the rage clawing at his insides.

He rolled his shoulders, adjusting his cuffs, then turned toward the VIP stairs.

It was time to end this.

Archer looked around the room. The team was moving into position. They'd have to do this quietly, as there were too many civilians. They might be sleezebags, but they were still civilians. He watched as the team made their way up the stairs one-by-one

and moved beyond the velvet curtains, which effectively blocked them from view.

Molina was here, but if he stuck to his tried-and-true MO, it wouldn't be for long. He was a slimy weasel and seemed able to slip away from things with an almost uncanny ease.

Reyna's voice buzzed in his earpiece. "We're in position. I'm in position if things get dicey and the others have already positioned themselves inside. Molina's in the big room at the end of the hallway. Looks like another ballroom. Double doors. Four armed goons. Silencers. Watch your six."

Archer moved beyond the velvet rope and up the stairs.

"Sir?" a man called from the main floor. "That's a restricted area."

"Shit," Reyna whispered in his ear.

"I understand that," Archer said in an English accent. "I was told by Mr. Molina he had some choice merchandise available. I flew in from London, but if it's restricted, I can call my pilot to ready the plane and you can tell Mr. Molina why I wasn't in attendance."

"Damn you're good," chuckled Reyna softly in his ear. "And the accent is spot on. You sound just like Nigel at Baker Street."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you were here at Mr. Molina's invitation. Please proceed, and my apologies."

"None necessary. You were just doing your job."

Breathing a silent sigh of relief, Archer continued up the stairs. With Reyna in

position to take out anyone who needed taking out, Archer slipped into the VIP auction. The air inside was thick with expensive cologne, sweat, and something darker—the quiet hum of power, of danger. Archer could smell it, feel it in the calculated way the bidders lounged in their chairs, glasses of high-end whiskey in hand, their gazes fixed on the three terrified women standing on the small platform at the front of the room.

They dressed the girls in underbust corsets, cinched tightly to expose and show off their breasts, and the most minuscule thongs he'd ever seen. The outfits left nothing to the imagination of the leering buyers. The girls' wrists were bound with delicate silk ribbons meant to make the whole thing look like some depraved game. Archer's stomach burned with barely leashed rage. No doubt this was what he'd wanted to do to Lanie.

Molina was standing at the far end of the room, speaking with one of his buyers, his back partially turned. He was cocky. Too comfortable. He thought he was untouchable.

Archer was about to change that. Archer flexed his fingers, signaling Kane, Logan, and the two other Cerberus operatives to move. Guns were out of the question—too many civilians in the room, the victims and everyone downstairs. Too many lives at risk. So, they'd do this the old-fashioned way.

Archer took the lead, stepping away from the doors with the kind of presence that made people look twice. The conversations in the room faltered, eyes turning toward him as he strode forward, masked, dressed like a buyer.

Molina's head lifted, and for a split second, their gazes locked.

Recognition flickered.

Then all hell broke loose. The men who had been so comfortable lounging in their seats, ogling the women, ran for the exit.

“They’re headed for the stairway...” said Reyna.

“Hold your fire. Let them go.”

Archer knew one of the team had taken pictures of all those present. Cerberus’ facial recognition program would give them names to go with the faces and they could round them up later. Getting the girls to safety was their priority and catching Molina was a close second.

One of Molina’s men—big, ex-military from the look of him—was the first to react, yanking a sleek black pistol from his jacket. He barely got the barrel up before Logan was on him, slamming his arm to the side and twisting until the bone cracked.

The shot was muffled, but its sound still echoed in Archer’s ears. The other goons weren’t far behind.

Another silenced round hissed through the air, missing Kane’s shoulder by an inch before he ducked low, driving his elbow into a second man’s gut and sending him sprawling.

One of the other Cerberus men moved like a ghost, a blade flashing as he cut the ties off the first girl’s wrists, shoving her behind the nearest couch for cover, before moving on to the next.

Archer didn’t stop moving. Molina was slipping away, retreating toward the side entrance like the slimy bastard he was. Archer surged forward, but another one of the goons intercepted him, bringing his pistol up to bear.

Archer ducked to the side, grabbed the man's wrist, and wrenched it sideways, forcing the gun to drop. In the same breath, he drove his knee into the guy's ribs and sent him crashing to the floor.

"Archer—Molina's moving!" Reyna hissed in his ear.

Archer's head snapped up, just in time to see the door slam shut behind the trafficker.

"Shit."

Logan took down the last goon with a brutal chokehold, leaving the bastard unconscious on the floor.

The room was silent except for the ragged breathing of the rescued women and the muffled bass of the party outside.

Kane straightened, glancing toward the exit. "He's escaped."

Archer clenched his jaw. "Not for long."

CHAPTER 10

ARCHER

Lanie had gone too far. Again.

Archer paced the length of his bedroom, his control fraying with every second that passed. His jaw clenched as he replayed the night in his head—her defiance, her refusal to listen, the way she'd lied to his face about seeing Molina.

That was the one that burned. She had hidden the truth from him, even knowing the risk. He thought she'd begun to trust him and to understand the importance of honesty in their dynamic. He scoffed to himself. Was she even aware they had a dynamic or what it was? She should have known that keeping secrets in a situation like this could get her or others killed.

And that? That was unacceptable. If she didn't know what their dynamic was, she was about to find out. He stalked down the hall, opening the door to her room without knocking.

"Lanie, I need to speak to you in my room. Follow me."

"Archer?"

"Now Lanie."

He turned and strode back across the hall, gratified to hear the sound of her footsteps

behind him. He opened the door and ushered her inside. When he closed the door, he found her standing near the bed, her green dress still molded to her curves like a second skin. She was watching him, her breathing uneven, her hands curled into the silk fabric at her sides.

She knew. She knew exactly what she'd done, but more importantly, she knew exactly what was coming. He had warned her, and he had warned her of the consequences. As he recalled, she'd earned herself a count of ten.

"You lied to me," he said, his voice dangerously low.

Lanie swallowed hard. "I..."

"Don't." He stalked toward her, backing her up step by step until she hit the edge of the bed. He planted his hands on either side of her hips, caging her in. "You saw him. You knew he was there, and you didn't tell me."

Her breath hitched. "I didn't..."

"You did." His fingers traced her jaw, tipping her chin up. "And what happens when you lie to me, little one?"

A flush crept up her throat. "Archer..."

"Answer me."

Her lips parted, her pulse fluttering beneath his fingertips. He could see it now—the way her body softened, the way her pupils dilated, the way she responded to his authority even when she wanted to fight it.

"Punishment," she whispered.

"That's right."

She exhaled shakily; her gaze darting away. "I was scared," she admitted. "I didn't want you to lose control."

Archer stilled. For a moment, just a moment, something in his chest ached. She had been protecting him. But that didn't change the fact that she had put herself in danger or that she had lied to him.

"You don't get to make that call," he murmured. "You don't get to decide what I can or can't handle. You follow my rules, or you deal with the consequences. That is what you agreed to, isn't it?"

Lanie swallowed hard, then nodded.

"Words, little one."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl."

Archer's fingers grazed her wrist, then he caught both hands in one of his own. "You're going to learn tonight," he said softly, "that lying to me isn't an option."

Her breath stuttered. "What—what are you going to do?"

Archer moved behind her, his hands skimming her waist before pushing her forward. She gasped as he guided her over the edge of the leather chaise in his bedroom, her hands bracing against the cool surface.

"You're going to stay just like this," he murmured, his voice thick with authority.

"And you're going to take what I give you. I warned you once that punishment would always be given on the bare. Remove your dress and panties."

She shivered. "Archer..."

"Fifteen."

Lanie pulled her dress up and over her head and wiggled out of her panties so that only her bra remained. She glanced over her shoulder. "Should I take off my bra, too? I've seen subs at the club get punished and they are almost always naked."

Fuck. She was going to kill him, but he'd started now. Lanie needed to know she could count on his consistency and that he would do as he said.

"I'll do it," he said, kneeling on the chaise behind her.

Archer fisted her hair, drawing her back to him until he could reach around her to unfasten her lace bra, which closed at the front. He released the closure and removed her bra, never releasing his hold on her hair. The back of his hand passed over her nipple, causing it to peak. He dragged his hand back across one nipple to the other, as it too seemed to be begging for attention. He traced her areola with his finger before he gave it a short, sharp pinch.

Lanie gasped, but was it pain or pleasure? Had she not sunk into his touch, he might have thought the former. He tweaked the first peak and provoked a moan. "I believe, little one, that you respond well to leadership and discipline and we shall do well together."

She stiffened until he teased her nipple as he kissed her neck. "Archer," she moaned, all fear forgotten.

“I’ll take care of you, little one. All you need to do is agree and submit.”

She nodded.

“Good girl,” he crooned. “Are you on birth control?”

“Yes, Daddy, and I just had my checkup and am clean.”

“I can say the same. Do you want me to fuck you, little one?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good, because there isn’t anything I’d rather do, but first we must see to your discipline.”

She nodded.

He released her hair and pressed on the nape of her neck, bending her over the back of the chaise. Her ass was perfection, firm and round. He ran his hand down her spine from her neck and caressed her ass. Lanie shivered. He wondered if anyone had ever known how to handle her. She might have a bit of the brat in her, but he had no intention of taming her.

Oh, he’d keep her safe and teach her to obey him, but he’d never wanted a perfect sub, but one that would challenge him in such a way that he would have reason to discipline her and then spend hours in bed forgiving her.

He slapped the curve of her ass—once lightly, and a second time with a bit more sting so that she hissed.

Another sharp slap landed across the curve of her ass, and she yelped, but with the

next smack her spine softened and she relaxed. Her body might be softening with the administering of her discipline, but his cock was getting harder with every swat.

“Archer,” she moaned.

"What was that?" he asked, running his palm over the sting.

She sucked in a breath. "Daddy."

"That's better."

He delivered the next smack with measure; more sound than force, but enough to jolt her hips forward. He followed with another and then another, watching as the flush bloomed over her skin.

By the eighth, she was writhing, and the smell of her arousal filled his nostrils.

By the tenth, she was moaning. He didn't want her to count; he wanted her focused on the sensation. By accepting his discipline, she was accepting his dominance, and all that came with it. He delivered the last five smacks in a steady rhythm with a modicum of sting. He let his hand linger to hold in the heat and reveled in the feel of her warmed and pinked flesh.

Sweet Lanie—she responded so honestly, with no attempt at subterfuge or guile. He sat on the chase behind her and pulled her into his lap, not giving a damn that her arousal would stain his trousers. That's what dry cleaners were for.

He laid her head on his shoulder. She shuddered, and whispered, “Oh God, Sir, please.” She tried to get up from his lap, but Archer wasn't having it. “I'm going to mess up your trousers.”

"A stain I shall wear proudly," Archer chuckled darkly. "Not God, little one." His fingers trailed between her thighs, finding her already slick labia. "But keep begging, and I might give you what you want."

She whimpered.

"Tell me what you've learned," he murmured, teasing her with slow, torturous strokes.

"I—I won't lie to you again."

He pressed his thumb against her clit, circling just enough to make her gasp. "And?"

Her body trembled beneath his hands. "And I'll listen," she panted.

"Damn right you will."

Her breath hitched as he slid two fingers inside her, pumping slowly, deliberately, and then pressing down on her clit as he did so. She arched into his touch.

"Please," she whimpered.

Archer grinned. "Please, what, little one?"

"Please let me come."

He chuckled. "Not yet."

He dragged it out, pushing her to the edge again and again, until her body was trembling so hard she could barely breathe.

"Archer, please," she begged. "I can't..."

"You can."

"Please, Daddy."

Archer exhaled roughly, gripping her hips. "Now," he growled.

Lanie called his name as she came, her body trembling before it stiffened and then relaxed as she sighed and collapsed against him. He helped her off his lap and onto her knees between his spread legs. She looked up and licked her lips as he opened his fly and freed his cock.

"Open your mouth, Lanie. You're going to suck my cock."

"Yes, Sir."

Her lips parted, and he thrust his cock between them, aiming for the back of her throat. She didn't resist or gag. Instead, she swirled her tongue around his cock. Archer groaned. In the future he'd spend a weekend teaching her exactly what he wanted when she gave him a blow job; he'd also teach her what it was to be brought to the edge with no release. But at this moment, all he knew was his own need. She'd responded beautifully to her spanking. They would do well together.

He wondered why it was that Lanie called to something deeper in him. He might not know the answer, but he knew it was true. She was smart, sweet, and funny. She was so innocently sexy that he'd had to handle himself every night since he'd met her. No more.

Archer fisted her hair, moving her mouth up and down his cock. The sight of it disappearing into the sweet recesses of her mouth was almost enough to undo him.

She sucked and licked his cock like it was her favorite lollipop. As he thrust into her mouth, her tongue caressed the sensitive vein along the underside of his cock in the most delicious way. He'd withdraw until just the head brushed her lips before driving back in.

He pulled out without warning, stood and scooped her up, taking her to his bed and laying her on it. She spread her legs, the evidence of her previous orgasm glistening at the opening of her pussy. In due time, his cum would drip from her pussy as well.

"Please, Daddy, will you fuck me now?"

He chuckled. She was too sexy and too bratty for words, and God help him, he couldn't resist her. He moved over her body, settling himself between her legs, grasping her hips with his thumbs resting on her hipbones and his hands cupping her buttocks. She groaned. Good; there was still some sting. Come morning, her ass wouldn't be the only thing that ached from this night.

Lining his cock up with her entrance, he began to push himself in. Her pussy was tight and hot, and he was large and needy. She closed her eyes and moaned.

"No, little one, look at me. I want to see you take my cock for the first time, and I want to see you come when I fuck you."

Lanie opened her eyes wide as he continued to work his way inside her until his balls rested against her. God, she felt good. He gave her some time to adjust to his size. He drew back slowly and slid back in, more easily this time. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him. Her pussy clamped down on him, trying not to let him withdraw.

"Please, Daddy," she begged.

If she kept that up, he'd never last to really assuage his need, but then there'd be time enough for that as well. They could hole up here in the house and he'd fuck her over and over again, making her come until she begged him to come... and he would.

Holding her still, he began to pound into her. Again and again, he pulled back and thrust in, angling his body so that he gave her more of his weight. He realized he was losing control when he wanted to give into the ruthlessness of his need. He fucked her relentlessly, reveling in her response. He could feel the familiar sizzle at the base of his spine as his cock began to swell and twitch.

Laine writhed beneath him as her inner walls spasmed around him, and her breath sped up. The moans became whimpers as her orgasm approached. She stiffened in anticipation, and she began to pant. Then suddenly, as he gave a final, savage thrust, she fell over the edge, and she screamed in ecstasy, her pussy clamping down on him as he began pumping his seed into her, greedily milking his cock. He savored every bit of pleasure he could take from her as he held her in his arms.

Lanie was curled in his bed, her breathing soft and even, when Archer's phone buzzed. He grabbed it, slipping carefully out of bed and moving slowly so as not to disturb her as he stepped into the hallway. He'd already had her a second time, devouring her pussy and making her scream again before pulling her onto his cock and fucking her hard while she clung to him and called his name.

"Talk," he said into the phone, keeping his voice low.

Reyna's voice came through, sharp and urgent. "We have a problem."

Archer's jaw clenched. "What kind?"

"The kind that means Lanie isn't just being watched."

His blood went cold.

"We confirmed it," Reyna continued. "Someone inside Club Southside is feeding information to Molina. Someone close. They knew exactly where she was going to be tonight."

Archer's fingers tightened around the phone.

"Tell me you have a name," he growled.

Reyna hesitated.

"Not yet," she admitted. "But we're close. And Archer..."

"What?"

A beat. Then: "Lanie was supposed to be taken tonight."

The room tilted. Archer exhaled slowly, fighting the fury clawing up his throat. Not happening. Not ever.

He glanced back into the bedroom, watching Lanie's sleeping form beneath his sheets.

She had no idea. No idea how close she had come to being stolen away from him forever.

Archer turned back to the hallway, his voice cold, steady.

"Find the traitor," he ordered. "Because if I do? There won't be anything left of them."

He ended the call, slipping back into the bedroom. Lanie shifted, murmuring his name in her sleep, her fingers curling in the sheets like she was reaching for him.

Archer settled beside her, running a slow hand down her back. He wasn't losing her. Not to Molina. Not to anyone.

And whoever had betrayed them? Tried to steal her away from him? They were already dead.

CHAPTER 11

LANIE

Lanie woke to the feeling of warmth—strong, possessive arms wrapped around her, a steady heart beating beneath her cheek.

For a moment, she didn't move. She stayed curled against Archer's chest, letting herself absorb the rare, fleeting peace that came with being held by a man who made her feel safe. That was the problem, though. Safety was an illusion. And last night had proven just how fragile that illusion was.

Her eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the dim light filtering through the curtains. Shadows still draped Archer's bedroom, but something felt... off. It took her a second to realize what it was.

The house was too quiet.

She shifted carefully, trying not to wake Archer as she slipped from the bed. He made a low, sleepy sound in protest, his grip tightening instinctively around her waist, but she wiggled free. The moment her bare feet hit the hardwood floor, the warmth disappeared, replaced by a creeping chill of unease.

Moving toward the window, she pushed back the curtain, and her stomach dropped.

Armed men were stationed outside.

They weren't just patrolling the perimeter; they were positioned strategically, standing alert with eyes scanning the street. She could make out at least three in the backyard alone. And those were just the ones she could see.

Lanie exhaled sharply and ran back to the room he'd given her to grab her phone—except it wasn't on the nightstand where she'd left it.

"What the hell?" she muttered under her breath.

Before she could even start looking for it, the low, gravelly voice behind her sent shivers down her spine.

"You're not going to like the answer to that question, little one."

Lanie whirled around to find Archer standing behind her in the doorway, watching her with an unreadable expression. His eyes were sharp despite the fact that he'd just woken up, his body all lean muscle and restrained power as he walked toward her, bending over to toss her over his shoulder. When she struggled, he swatted her ass.

"You don't leave our bedroom without telling me. Do it again and you'll owe me five. I rather enjoyed waking up to you last night... and you seemed to enjoy it as well."

Unceremoniously, he dumped her back on the bed and stretched lazily. Her heart hammered. Why did she find him so wickedly arousing? She fought down the feeling.

"Where's my phone, Archer?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He was way too pleased with himself.

“Confiscated.”

Lanie’s hands fisted at her sides. “You can’t just confiscate my phone?”

“Do you have any idea how adorable you are when you think you can tell me what to do? You can’t, by the way. And I’d dial back the attitude if I were you.”

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, standing in one fluid motion. He didn’t even seem to care that he was wearing only a pair of loose sweatpants that hung dangerously low on his hips. He stalked toward her, unhurried but with an unmistakable air of authority.

“Before you decide to throw a tantrum, you should know that I also installed full security measures. The house is locked down. Cerberus is stationed outside. The cameras have been upgraded. Your movements will be monitored. And you, Lanie...” he reached out, sliding a finger beneath her chin, tilting her face up to meet his gaze, “...are not leaving this house without me.”

Lanie’s pulse spiked. Not from fear, not from anger, but from the sheer power of him. Archer Vaughn was a force of nature she had no chance of withstanding, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t fight him, anyway.

“You had no right,” she snapped.

“I have every right,” he corrected, his voice dropping to that dark, dangerous tone that made her belly flip and arousal surge through her system. She had enjoyed his waking her up to make love to her throughout the night. “You’re mine to protect, and I will protect you—whether or not you like it.”

Frustration clawed at her chest. “I’m not some prisoner, Archer. You can’t just lock me up like I’m...”

"Like you're a target?" he cut in smoothly. "Because that's exactly what you are."

Lanie gritted her teeth. "You don't get to make that decision for me."

Archer's eyes darkened. "I do when your life is at risk."

The silence between them hummed with electricity, the energy in the room shifting, intensifying. She should be angry. Hell, she was angry. But there was something about the way Archer took control—so effortlessly, so absolutely—that made her body betray her. She felt the pull of it deep in her core, the primal instinct to challenge him just to see how he'd push back.

She inhaled sharply, forcing herself to focus. "You can't do this alone."

Archer's jaw tensed. "Lanie..."

"No, listen to me," she interrupted. "Vinnie trusts me. He still sees me as his. That means he'll let me close. If I play the part—if I make him believe that I'm scared, that I'm running back to him—he'll let me in. And once I'm inside, I can get you the information you need."

The moment the words left her mouth, she knew she'd pushed too far.

Archer went completely still. Not just physically—but in that lethal, dangerous way that sent a shiver of awareness down her spine.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was almost too calm. "You think I'm letting you anywhere near that bastard?"

Lanie swallowed hard. "If it means taking him down, then yes."

Archer exhaled slowly, like a man desperately trying to keep his temper in check. "You do not get to decide that."

"It's my life!"

"And it's mine to protect." His voice snapped like a whip. "You don't get to play bait, Lanie. You don't get to walk into a den of predators and expect to come out unscathed."

She refused to back down. "But I can help! If I..."

"No . " Archer was in her space before she could blink, backing her up against the wall, his hands gripping her hips, pinning her against the wall. His body caged hers in, all heat and raw dominance. "You are not going near Vinnie Molina again, do you understand me?"

Lanie trembled. Not from fear—but from something far more dangerous. "You don't own me."

Archer let out a low, dark chuckle. "The hell I don't."

Her breath hitched as his fingers slid down her arms, gripping her wrists, pressing them against the wall on either side of her head. His mouth was so close—so damn close she could feel the heat of his breath against her lips.

"You're going to be the death of me," he murmured, his voice laced with something rough and possessive. "You challenge me. And God help me, I love it, little one." He dipped his head, his lips just barely grazing the corner of her jaw. "But don't mistake my patience for permission."

Lanie's pulse thundered.

"You will not put yourself in danger," he continued, his grip tightening ever so slightly. "You will not throw yourself at Molina like some sacrificial lamb. You will listen to me. You will obey me, because I will not lose you. Are we clear ? "

Her breath stuttered, her resolve fracturing under the sheer force of him. She wanted to fight him on this—wanted to push back just to see how far he'd go—but deep down, she knew.

Archer Vaughn was immovable.

And God help her, she loved it... she loved him.

After a long, heated pause, she exhaled. "Yes, Sir."

Archer stayed there for a moment longer, letting her submission settle. Then, slowly, he released her wrists, his hands skimming down her sides in a slow, deliberate caress.

"Good girl," he murmured.

Lanie closed her eyes, swallowing hard. She wasn't sure when this fight had shifted into something else—something dark and electric and dangerously tempting—but there was no denying it.

The battle was far from over.

And in the end, she wasn't sure who would win.

That evening, Lanie stormed into Club Southside—Archer letting her walk ahead of him—her heels clicking sharply against the sleek floor as she wove through the crowd. Her heart was still racing from the fight with Archer, her skin still tingling

from the way he had looked at her, touched her, commanded her.

Damn him.

She wasn't stupid—she knew Vinnie was a threat. But Archer ordering her around like she was some delicate thing to be coddled? No. She would not let him make decisions for her—well, not all of them anyway.

Lanie stormed into the submissives' lounge.

“We assigned you a locker,” said Samantha Coltraine. “And Archer had some things delivered for you.”

Lanie stomped her foot. “He makes me crazy,” she seethed.

Samantha laughed. “Welcome to sharing your life with a Dom. They are far more arrogant and stubborn than other men, but they are also far more caring and wonderful.”

Reyna snorted. “Don't let her kid you, Lanie. There are days she throws things at King. I'd hate to know what your monthly pottery bill is.”

Samantha laughed. “You'll see, Lanie. Archer loves you and will do anything to keep you safe.”

“Keep that in mind before you go off and do something stupid,” added Reyna.

Lanie opened the door to her locker and went pale. There was nothing in there except for corsets and thongs. Closing the door, she said, “I'll just wear what I have on.”

“Not if you're planning to go anywhere other than the lounge. You can wear street

wear there, but only fet wear on the dungeon floor.” Reyna held up her hand to stave off Lanie’s objection. “It’s the same for the Doms as it is for the subs.”

“Can someone help me into one of these things?” Lanie asked, holding up a corset.

“Absolutely,” said Samantha.

Reyna nodded. “Samantha is good with laces. She can make you look great while making sure you can breathe.”

Samantha helped her into the corset—a beautiful concoction of raspberry lace over black satin.

“I just don’t understand why one minute, I’m all I Am Woman Hear Me Roar, and the next minute, I’m a puddle of goo at his feet with a spanked ass.”

As Samantha pulled the laces tighter, Alicia Wickersham came around the corner. “I can answer that. Your Archer...”

“He isn’t my Archer.”

All three women looked at each other, then back at her and laughed.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” Reyna said. “You may not think he’s your Archer, but he is. And you are most definitely his. I’m surprised he hasn’t slapped a collar around your throat.”

Alicia laughed. “Me too.”

“You were going to tell me why I can’t seem to hold my own against him.”

“Because you don’t want to,” explained Alicia.

“And I’ll tell you something else,” said Reyna, “sometimes you submit even when you don’t want to because as much peace as you find in your submission, he finds in his dominance.”

“That’s gorgeous,” said Samantha as she tied off the laces. “Don’t forget your thong.”

Lanie dangled the thing from her finger. “It’s so small I’m not sure anyone would notice if I didn’t have it on.”

The other women laughed. “Trust me, they’d notice.”

Lanie headed up to the lounge, where she could see the dungeon floor. The club was alive tonight, bodies pressed together in intimate dances, the air thick with the scent of expensive cologne, leather, and desire. The deep, sensual bass of the music pulsed beneath her feet, and for the first time in a long time, she felt grounded. She needed this space. She needed control.

What she didn’t need was the overwhelming presence of the man currently stalking toward her.

She felt him before she saw him.

The moment Archer entered the room, the energy shifted. Conversations quieted. Bodies moved instinctively out of his way, and heads turned. Even in a place filled with dominant men, Archer owned the space with nothing more than a glance.

Lanie swallowed, her pulse skipping wildly as she tried to ignore the way her body responded to him. She knew she was playing with fire, but damn it, she would not let him dictate her every move.

She reached the bar, ordering a drink she knew she wouldn't finish. Tessa raised an eyebrow but didn't comment, sliding the glass across the counter just as a large, familiar hand wrapped around Lanie's wrist.

Her breath caught.

"Up. Now," Archer commanded, his voice low, dangerous.

Lanie yanked her arm back, glaring at him. "Excuse me?"

Archer's jaw ticked, but his voice remained controlled. "You don't get to run from me, little one."

She scoffed, tossing back a sip of her drink. "You don't own me, Archer."

The growl that rumbled in his chest sent a shiver down her spine. "Don't I?"

Before she could fire back, he grabbed her waist, his grip firm but not bruising, and pulled her from the lounge into the shadows of a private alcove. The music drowned out her gasp, the darkened corner shielding them from prying eyes while still leaving them close enough to hear the hum of the surrounding club.

"Let go," she hissed, pushing at his chest.

He didn't budge.

Archer's fingers slid into her hair, tugging her head back just enough to expose the delicate line of her throat. His other hand skimmed down her arm, finding her wrist, pinning it to the wall beside her head.

"You want to keep fighting me?" he murmured, his lips a breath away from her ear.

"Fine. But don't think for a second you're walking out of here without knowing exactly who you belong to."

Lanie gasped, her breath coming faster. "You can't just..."

His palm closed around her throat.

Not hard. Not hurting. Just a firm, commanding grip that made her body go liquid and her mind short-circuit.

"I can," he murmured, his voice dark silk, laced with possession. "And I will."

Her back pressed against the cool wall, her body caged between Archer and the hard surface. The club pulsed around them, but in this moment, it was just him .

Just them.

"Is everything all right?" asked King.

"Back off," Archer growled.

"I will just as soon as Lanie says she isn't being forced or coerced."

Before things could escalate between the two men, Lanie said, "I'm fine, King. Archer and I are just working through some of the parameters of our dynamic."

"Yeah, good luck with that working through part." King chuckled as he walked away.

"You test me," Archer said, seeming a bit more settled, his thumb stroking over the pulse racing at her throat. "You push, you challenge, you run. And yet..." his knee pressed between her thighs, forcing her legs apart, "you always end up back under my

hands."

A needy whimper slipped past her lips before she could stop it.

Archer exhaled sharply, his breath warm against her cheek. "That's it, little one. Stop pretending you don't want this."

Lanie hated he was right. Hated that she was already shaking, already coming undone just from his voice, his touch, his control.

His grip tightened ever so slightly, just enough to keep her exactly where he wanted her. "I'm going to make you fall apart right here, against this wall, and you will not make a sound. Do you understand me?"

Her thighs clenched together, heat pooling low in her belly. "Archer..."

"Do you understand me?"

God help her, she nodded, and whispered, "Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl."

His hand slid lower, his fingers brushing the inside of her thigh, teasing the edge of her thong. There wasn't much between his hand and her sex. The minute he touched her, he'd know just how much she wanted him.

She should stop him. She should push him away. She didn't.

His fingers found the heat between her legs, and she nearly sobbed .

"Already soaked," Archer murmured approvingly. "You love being owned, don't

you?"

She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

He rewarded her silence with a slow, devastating stroke. Her hips jerked, desperate for more.

"Stay still," he warned, his voice edged with something dangerous.

Lanie whimpered, barely holding herself together as his fingers played her body like an instrument. He circled her clit with his forefinger—not actually touching it. He continued to stroke her, and then, just as suddenly as he'd started, he stopped.

She gasped, her body arching into him, seeking more, but Archer only chuckled darkly.

"Not until I say you can, little one," he murmured, kissing the shell of her ear. "I own every inch of you—and not just your body, but your orgasms as well. Come without permission and you'll find yourself tied to our bed being made to come repeatedly until you are exhausted."

She wanted to scream. Instead, she nodded. He kissed her once, deep and consuming, before finally releasing her throat, her wrist, and stepping back. Lanie nearly collapsed.

Archer caught her chin, tilting her face up, so she had no choice but to meet his gaze. "You will obey me," he said, low and lethal. "Or I will lock you down until this is over . "

A flash of defiance ignited in her chest. "And if I don't?"

His lips curled. "Try me."

Lanie exhaled shakily. "Fine." She straightened. "I'll go along with your orders . "

Archer narrowed his eyes. "Just like that?"

She met his gaze, her expression unreadable. "On one condition."

He arched a brow.

"You let me in," she said. "On everything. The plan. The takedown. All of it. I need to be a part of this. I need to be part of your life, not just your fuck toy."

"I've got news for you, little one. I will let you in, but you want to be my sweet little fuck toy, don't you?"

The silence stretched between them; the battle waging behind his dark, stormy gaze.

Finally, she nodded.

"Good girl."

Before she could process her quasi-victory, a voice crackled through his earpiece.

"Archer, it's Reyna. We've got a location on Molina. He's meeting with his buyers in seventy-two hours. Private estate outside the city . "

Lanie's stomach turned.

This was it.

Archer's grip on her waist tightened. "We end this."

Lanie took a shaky breath. "Yes, Sir."

Archer's eyes darkened at the word, but he didn't call her on it. Not yet.

Instead, he took her hand, bringing it up to kiss the underside of her wrist. "You'd better go get back in street clothes. I'll have one of our guys take you home."

She thought about arguing but thought better of it. He was already feeling a bit cranky. No need to add to that. "Archer?"

"Yes?"

"Would you kiss me?"

"Only since you asked me so sweetly."

Lanie felt the warmth of his breath as he leaned in, his lips mere inches from hers. Time slowed, her pulse hammering in anticipation. When his mouth finally met hers, the world around them disappeared. His lips were soft yet demanding, coaxing her into surrender with each lingering press. The kiss deepened, his tongue teasing along the seam of her lips before she parted them, welcoming the slow, intoxicating exploration.

A shiver ran down her spine as his hand traced the curve of her waist, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them. Heat pooled low in her belly, her fingers threading through his hair, tugging slightly as he deepened the kiss. The way he moved against her—deliberate, hungry, yet achingly tender—set her entire body alight.

The taste of him, warm and faintly sweet, sent a thrill through her veins. She melted into him, losing herself in the rhythm they created, the slow push and pull, the silent conversation spoken through lips and breath and touch. Every kiss was a promise, every sigh an unspoken need.

When they finally broke apart, her chest rose and fell in sync with his, her lips swollen, her heart racing. He rested his forehead against hers, his thumb brushing over her cheek, as if memorizing the moment. Lanie opened her eyes, meeting his smoldering gaze. He turned her toward the submissives' lounge and swatted her backside lightly to get her moving.

As she started to go, he grabbed her shoulders, pressing his body with its hard cock up against her. "You're mine, little one. Never forget that. I'd better not hear you gave the security team a hard time."

God, she hated how when he said things like that in a certain way; it was as if every ounce of her wanting to be in control went right out the window, and all she wanted was him.

CHAPTER 12

ARCHER

The next few days were a settling-in period for him and Lanie. She still argued with him, but then he suspected she'd never be a quiet, complacent submissive, and he didn't want her to be. She mostly followed his rules, enjoying his unrestricted power to touch her.

As Archer stood in the center of the dimly lit war room, he kept thinking of her. He had to remind himself to focus. The room was almost suffocating with the quiet intensity that seemed to hang in the air.

The blueprints of the estate lay spread across the table, marked with precise notations, entry points, and security weaknesses. Around him, the Cerberus team moved with lethal efficiency—checking weapons, finalizing logistics, and going over contingencies. The mission was clear: infiltrate as buyers, neutralize the threats, extract the captives, and put an end to Vinnie Molina once and for all.

Failure was not an option.

"Reyna, you're lead on comms. Keep all exits covered. Seth, get me eyes on their internal security grid. I want to know how many bodies we're up against before we step foot inside," Archer ordered, his voice sharp and controlled.

"Already working on it," Seth muttered, typing furiously at his laptop. "They've got a tight system, but I can crack it. Give me five."

Archer nodded, scanning the room until his gaze landed on King, who stood with his arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

"You got a bad feeling about this, or is that just your usual scowl?" Archer asked.

King exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "We've done a dozen of these ops, but something about this one feels off. Molina's been quiet—too quiet—the past few days."

Coop nodded. "Yeah, it's like he's waiting for us."

"Let him wait," Archer growled. "We'll make sure he doesn't walk away from this one."

Reyna looked up from her tablet, her expression grim. "We still haven't confirmed who his inside man is. Someone at Club Southside fed him info on Lanie. If we don't plug that leak, we're walking into a setup."

Archer clenched his jaw. "Then we adjust. We assume they know we're coming and hit them harder."

The team murmured agreement. He'd dealt with men like Molina before—slippery bastards who thrived on control and manipulation. And if Molina had half a brain, he'd already expected an attack.

Which meant Archer had to stay ahead. But they had one wild card on this op—Lanie.

His gut twisted. He and Lanie had argued about her involvement just this morning. The last thing he needed was her testing his patience or his orders again. She'd agreed—grudgingly—to stay out of the op and let Cerberus handle it.

Yet something about the way she'd said it hadn't set right with him.

Archer pulled out his phone, ready to check on her, when Seth's voice cut through the tension.

"Got it!" Seth's fingers flew over the keyboard, pulling up security feeds from the estate. Grainy images filled the monitors, showing men stationed at key entrances, a dozen or so guards patrolling the perimeter, and inside—a locked basement filled with women.

"Holy shit," Reyna muttered, staring at the screen.

Archer's blood went ice cold.

"How many?" he asked, his voice tight.

"At least ten, maybe more," Seth confirmed.

Archer exhaled, forcing himself to stay focused. "We move in as planned. No mistakes. No unnecessary risks."

His phone buzzed. He glanced down. And everything stopped.

A text message appeared on his phone:

You won't let me do this my way, so I'm doing it on my own. I need to finish this, Archer.

Archer went still, his fingers curling around the phone as a slow, burning rage built in his chest.

"Where the fuck is Lanie?" he asked, his voice dangerously calm.

Silence. Then Reyna's tablet beeped, her eyes widening as she scanned the screen.

"Two of our guys are down. She's gone," Reyna confirmed. "Slipped away twenty minutes ago and caught a cab. It was headed toward..."

"The estate," Archer finished, his voice like steel. His jaw clenched so tightly his teeth ached. "That stubborn, reckless little..."

"She's going to him," King realized, his tone dark. "She's handing herself over."

Archer shoved his chair back, already moving. "No. She's pretending to hand herself over. And when I get my hands on her, she's going to wish she hadn't."

"She could be buying us time," Logan pointed out.

Archer's laugh was sharp, humorless. "Or she could be walking straight into a fucking execution." He stormed toward the weapons locker, grabbing an extra gun, shoving it into his holster. "We adjust. We move now."

"Archer, wait!" Reyna stepped in front of him, blocking his path. "Think for a second. If she's in there, we need to be smart about this."

Archer's hands flexed at his sides, barely containing his fury. "We stick to the plan. But when we go in, Lanie is mine to handle."

He didn't give a damn if she thought she was protecting him, if she thought she was finally putting an end to Molina's hold on her—she belonged to him now. And that meant no one got to touch her. Not Molina. Not his men.

And if she got hurt in the process?

Archer swore he'd burn the whole fucking world down.

LANIE

Lanie took a slow breath, forcing her heartbeat to settle as she stepped out of the cab and walked toward the estate gates. Two guards stood at the entrance, watching her with cold, assessing eyes. She forced herself to keep walking, her posture relaxed, her chin lifted—not defiant, but not afraid. Vinnie would sense it if she was lying.

One guard pulled a radio from his belt. "She's here."

A crackling response she couldn't hear. Then, a moment later, the iron gates creaked open. Lanie stepped inside. She was on her own now... at least until Archer and Cerberus got here.

Inside the mansion, smoke and laughter hung in the air. The scent of expensive cigars, cologne, and something darker—something vile—clung to the walls. Lanie kept her hands at her sides, her nails digging into her palms to keep them from trembling as she was led into a lavish sitting room.

And then—there he was. Vinnie sat at the head of a leather couch, a glass of whiskey in one hand, his dark eyes sharp as he took her in.

"Lanie," he drawled, his lips curling upward. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

She forced a nervous swallow, letting her gaze drop just slightly—submissive, but not too much.

"I... I didn't know where else to go," she whispered.

Vinnie studied her for a long moment, then leaned back, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

"I'll admit, sweetheart," he said. "I didn't think I'd see you again. Thought you were too good for this life."

She let out a shaky breath. "I tried to be. But... it's not who I am."

Vinnie's eyes gleamed. "No, baby. It's not."

She had him. He believed her. He wanted to believe her, but then he laughed—low and amused.

Lanie's blood ran cold.

"Sweetheart," Vinnie said, setting his glass down and standing, his smile widening. "You wouldn't be stupid enough to lie to me, would you?"

The thing that had been sitting in her belly clawed at her.

He knew. He knew something.

Lanie forced herself to stay calm. But inside? Inside, she knew she was running out of time and prayed that Archer would get here in time. If he wasn't already coming for her, he would be soon.

ARCHER

Archer was livid. No, he was past livid. He was the kind of livid that came from rage that burned cold, controlled, dangerous.

Lanie had defied him. Again.

His grip on the steering wheel was a vise as he drove through the dark back roads leading to the estate. The information Reyna had gathered flashed in his mind—Molina was running an auction tonight, selling off the women his men had kidnapped. Lanie was walking straight into hell, thinking she could play her part without getting burned.

She thought she was in control. She didn't have a clue.

The estate loomed ahead, massive and sprawling, its opulence masking the rot underneath. Archer slowed his vehicle to a crawl, adjusting the black suit jacket he wore. His role tonight was simple—he wasn't coming in as Cerberus. He was coming in as a buyer.

A man with no morals. A man interested in the merchandise.

The thought turned his stomach, but the disguise would get him inside without a fight. And once he was in? All bets were off.

King's voice sputtered through his earpiece. "You're five minutes out from the auction room. Lanie's already inside. Molina's keeping her close."

Archer's jaw clenched. Of course he was.

"Logan and I have entry points secured," Reyna added. "Guards are posted at all the exits. We count at least twenty hostiles."

Twenty was a problem. Not for Cerberus, but for Lanie. A full-scale takedown would take careful precision. If she got caught in the crossfire...

No. Archer cut the thought off before it could take root. He would not let that happen.

That single thought pounded through his skull as he pulled into the estate's driveway. Two guards approached his car, rifles slung over their shoulders. Archer rolled down his window, his expression void of emotion.

"I'm expected," he said flatly.

One guard scanned his ID, stolen from a bidder whose description fit Archer closely enough that Seth had made it work. The buyer, whose identity he'd borrowed, would never make it to the auction.

The other guard gave him a slow once-over. "Go ahead," he said, stepping back.

Archer drove through, parking near the other luxury vehicles lining the estate's front entrance. He stepped out, smoothing a hand over his jacket, and adjusted the black mask covering the lower half of his face.

Then he walked inside.

The moment he stepped into the main hall, the energy shifted. The space was grand, filled with men in suits, laughter that didn't reach their eyes, and too many women looking like they were trying to disappear.

His gaze swept the room, searching, hunting...

And then he saw her. Lanie stood at Molina's side, her back straight, her shoulders squared. To anyone else, she would look as if she was playing her part to perfection. But he saw it—the way her fingers curled just slightly at her sides, the flicker of unease she was barely keeping in check.

His gut clenched. She was beautiful—too damn beautiful in that sleek dress, her hair framing her delicate features like something out of a dream.

But the moment he laid eyes on her, a different kind of possession took hold. She was his.

And Molina's fingers—casually resting against her hip—needed to be broken.

Archer moved through the crowd, his pulse a steady drum, each step calculated, precise. His expression remained neutral, though inside, a storm raged.

The auctioneer's voice rang out over the murmuring bidders. "Gentlemen, please take your seats. We have a special collection this evening, and our first presentation is..."

Archer ignored him. He kept his eyes locked on Lanie. And that was when she moved. She reached into Molina's pocket, her fingers quick and delicate, sliding out his phone in a move so smooth no one else noticed.

She turned her body just enough to obscure her next movement, tapping the screen rapidly.

She was sending the data to Cerberus. Smart girl. Too smart. Because the moment she finished, the phone buzzed in her hand, and Molin turned.

His dark eyes narrowed, his lips curling. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Lanie's breath hitched, but she didn't falter. "I—I just wanted to check..."

Molina's grip on her wrist tightened. "Lying little bitch," he hissed.

Archer was already moving.

Molina was about to die. But before he could reach them, the first gunshot rang out.

The room erupted into chaos—shouts, screams. The sound of bodies moving, scrambling.

Cerberus had entered. Reyna's voice buzzed through the earpiece. "We're in. Extraction is go."

Archer shoved through the chaos, gun already drawn, ignoring the scrambling bidders trying to flee. The only target that mattered was Lanie. But Molina was dragging her backward towards an exit.

Not fucking happening.

Archer surged forward, but a guard stepped into his path, gun raised. Archer didn't hesitate. One shot—center mass. The man crumpled.

Another thug lunged. Archer twisted, slamming an elbow into his throat before snapping his wrist, making the gun drop. By the time he turned again, Molina was nearly to the exit, dragging Lanie along. She was fighting. Kicking. Scratching.

Good girl.

Archer's pulse roared in his ears as he sprinted forward, the hallway narrowing, the walls pressing in. Molina turned, wild eyes locking on him.

"She's mine," he sneered. "You think I'll let you take her?"

Archer didn't bother responding. Didn't hesitate. He raised his gun, but before he could take the shot, Molina yanked Lanie in front of him like a human shield.

Her gasp was sharp, her hands clawing at his arm.

Archer froze.

Molina grinned, stepping backward toward a black door at the end of the hall. “See you soon, buddy .”

Then he was gone.

The door slammed shut. Archer lunged after them, his body brimming with lethal intent. His heartbeat was deafening, his blood running hot, his mind a singular, razor-sharp focus.

Lanie was his. And no one—no one—took what was his.

Molina thought he could escape. He thought he could keep her. Archer was about to show him exactly how wrong he was.

Archer’s pulse roared in his ears as he slammed through the door after Molina. His gun was up, his vision a sharp, deadly tunnel focused on the bastard dragging Lanie toward an exit at the far end of the room.

She was fighting. Hard.

But Molina was bigger, stronger. He had her arm twisted behind her back, forcing her to stumble as he yanked her toward the waiting SUV idling just outside.

They’d tracked Molina, his driver, and Lanie to the warehouse district. They were inside as Archer and his team made a silent entrance. Inside, the room was dark, industrial, the scent of gasoline and metal thick in the air. A single hanging bulb flickered overhead, casting long, shifting shadows across the concrete floor.

Archer stalked forward, every muscle coiled, his gun aimed. “Let her go, Molina.”

He didn’t stop. Didn’t even look back. “You don’t give orders here, Vaughn.” His voice was smug, gloating. “You think you’re in control? You don’t know shit.”

Archer’s finger tightened on the trigger. “You take one more step, and I put a bullet through your skull.”

Molina laughed, jerking Lanie tighter against him, using her as a human shield. “You won’t risk hitting her.”

Archer didn’t so much as blink. “You think I won’t kill you?” His voice was icy. Deadly. “You’re already a corpse. I’m just deciding where to put the bullet.”

Molina sneered, confidence oozing from every inch of his pathetic excuse for a body. “You should thank me. You wouldn’t even know what to do with her. A girl like Lanie? She needs...”

He never got the chance to finish.

Because Lanie made her move. She fucking fought. She slammed her head back into Molina’s nose, made a sharp rotation with her body, and then brought her knee up into his groin.

Molina choked out a guttural sound, his entire body buckling, his grip on her loosening.

But Lanie wasn’t done. She twisted out of his grasp and turned, fury burning in her eyes as she raked her nails down his face, leaving long, bloody scratches in her wake.

Molina howled. Archer took the shot. The gunshot echoed, sharp and final. A single

bullet, right between his beady little eyes. He never saw it coming. Archer regretted he hadn't known he was going to die, hadn't known Archer was the one to pull the trigger.

Molina's body crumpled, hitting the concrete floor with a sickening thud . The light in his eyes snuffed out instantly, a thin trickle of blood pooling beneath him.

Archer didn't move. Didn't lower his gun. He waited. Breath steady. Focus unshakable.

But Molina wasn't getting back up.

Not ever.

It was as if the world around them had shrunk to just the two of them, save for the distant sound of gunfire and chaos, as Cerberus dismantled the rest of the operation outside.

Lanie stood frozen, chest rising and falling in ragged breaths, her hands trembling. She looked up at Archer, and for the first time since Molina had taken her, really looked at him.

He was the man who'd just put a bullet in her past. The man who had promised to protect her—who had kept that promise without hesitation, without regret.

Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

Archer closed the distance between them in two long strides, shoving his gun back into its holster as he reached for her. She didn't flinch. Didn't shy away. She launched herself straight into his arms.

Archer wrapped her up, holding her tight , one hand fisting in her hair, the other gripping the small of her back, pressing her against him like he could fuse her body to his own.

She was shaking. But she wasn't breaking. She had fought, and she had won. And now—she was his. Completely.

“It's over,” he murmured, voice low, raw, the words meant for her and her alone.

Lanie's breath hitched as he clutched her tighter, and Archer knew, without a doubt, that he would never let her go.

LANIE

The full impact of what had happened didn't sink in until they were back at Archer's home.

She was safe.

The victims had been freed.

The Master's Market had suffered a catastrophic blow.

Vinnie was dead.

It was over.

For the first time in years, she wasn't looking over her shoulder. She wasn't waiting for the next moment to run, to fight, to survive. Lanie could also identify feelings of being untethered and lost.

She sat curled on the couch in Archer's dimly lit living room, legs tucked under her, staring at the fire crackling in the hearth. She barely remembered Archer leading her inside, his hands steady on her back, his voice quiet and reassuring.

Now, he was nearby, but not crowding her. She felt him, though. The heat of his presence, the unwavering strength of his silence. He hadn't spoken since they got back. Hadn't asked her how she was feeling, hadn't told her she'd done a good job, hadn't pushed her to process any of it before she was ready. He hadn't even scolded

her. It was a little unnerving.

Instead, he waited, and the significance of that seemed to mean more than anything else.

Finally, a slow, shuddering breath left her lips. “I don’t know what to do now.”

Archer, who had been sitting in the leather chair across from her, finally moved. He didn’t speak right away, just stood, walking toward her with quiet, controlled steps. When he reached her, he crouched down in front of her, resting his forearms on his knees. His gaze locked onto hers, steady, searching.

“You breathe,” he said simply.

Lanie let out a soft, humorless laugh. “That’s all?”

“For now.”

Her throat tightened. “I’ve been running for so long. I don’t know how to not be afraid.”

Archer reached out, brushing his knuckles over her cheek. The touch was featherlight but grounding. “Then let me remind you.”

She swallowed, searching his face. The firelight flickered over his features, casting shadows along his sharp jawline, his blue eyes dark and unreadable. He wasn’t demanding anything from her. He wasn’t expecting her to bounce back, to be okay just because the danger had passed.

He was giving her time.

Lanie’s breath trembled. “You won’t let me run, will you?”

His fingers trailed down her throat, stopping just above her pulse point. “Not a chance, little one.”

She exhaled sharply, the knot in her chest began to uncoil. She realized now what she needed. Not space; not distance. Him. Her anchor. Her home.

She reached up, hesitating for only a moment before curling her fingers around his wrist. “I don’t want to run anymore.”

A flicker of something passed through Archer’s gaze. He didn’t speak, just lifted her hand, pressing a kiss to the center of her palm.

Her breath hitched. It was such a simple gesture, but it unraveled something deep inside her.

She wanted him. Not just for protection. Not just for safety. She wanted to be his. She had completely conquered her fear of that.

A small, shaky inhale. Then she let go of his wrist and slid off the couch, sinking onto her knees in front of him. Archer’s entire body stilled. Lanie’s hands rested lightly on her thighs, her gaze lifted.

“I want this,” she whispered. “I want you.”

Archer’s jaw tightened. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” His fingers curled into fists at his sides, as if he was holding himself back. “Not out of fear. Not out of need.”

He growled low, lifting her face and searching it. “You’re choosing this. You’re choosing me.”

Lanie's pulse raced. She had never felt so sure of anything in her life.

"I choose you, Daddy."

He seemed to experience a sudden shift—not a breaking, but a settling into place. He exhaled deeply, his entire body shifting as he reached for her, cupping her face with both hands. "Good girl."

The praise sent a shiver through her. Then, slowly, deliberately, Archer leaned in, capturing her mouth in a deep, possessive kiss. Lanie melted against him, her hands sliding up to grip his wrists, holding onto him like he was the only solid thing in her world. His lips moved over hers with slow, devastating control, his tongue teasing, coaxing, until she was gasping against him.

He pulled back just enough to murmur, "Upstairs. Now."

She didn't hesitate; she rocked up onto her knees only to have Archer guide her through the darkened house, his grip firm around her wrist. When they reached his bedroom, he turned to face her, his expression unreadable.

"Clothes off."

Heat pooled low in her belly. She obeyed, slipping out of her dress with careful, measured movements, letting the silk slide down her body and removing her undergarments until she was bare before him.

Archer let out a slow, controlled breath, his gaze drinking her in. Then, without hesitation and with what seemed to be a sense of ownership, he touched her. Not rough, not hurried, but slow and reverent. His hands traced her curves. His lips followed, worshipping every inch of her skin.

Lanie trembled beneath his touch, her body burning, her breath coming faster as his

mouth moved lower, teasing, tormenting. Kneeling, he found her clit with his tongue, and she cried out—a shattered moan—her fingers in his hair, her hips tilting into his mouth as pleasure overwhelmed her.

He didn't let up. Didn't stop until she was begging, writhing, completely undone before him, barely able to stand. And then he stood, scooping her up and depositing her in his bed before removing his own clothes and joining her there.

Leaning over, he sucked one hardened nipple into his mouth and sucked hard before giving it the edge of his teeth as his fingers closed around the other and pinched it. Before she could even moan, he flipped her onto her belly, guiding her hands above her head as he pulled her up onto her knees while pressing her shoulders into the mattress.

“You stay like this—down in front with your ass and pussy presented to me and where I can reach your tits. You're mine, little one,” he murmured against her ear, his voice rough, possessive. “Say it.”

Lanie's breath stuttered as she nodded, saying, “I'm yours.”

Archer growled his approval. Then, with a single deep, slow thrust, he entered her. He drew back and then thrust in harder, more powerfully, possessively, filling her completely. It felt so good to be taken like this—hard and sure, rough and demanding—especially after all that had happened. He was making the point that he wasn't happy about what she'd done, but he was also showing her he knew she wasn't some fragile, delicate thing that would break easily.

His hips pounded against her ass, he fisted her hair and angling her head back so he could take her mouth. Their tongues danced together in a passionate kiss. His free hand squeezed one of her tits—first the whole thing and then the nipple, making her gasp. His fingers traced circles around nipples, sending shivers of delight through her entire body.

When he pulled out, she cried out in protest and received a sharp smack on her behind—the sting a welcome pain that gave away to pleasure as he rubbed it before spreading her labia and shoving his cock back in her wet pussy. He pulled out, teasing her, running the head from her clit downwards and back.

She moaned as he slammed back into her, the sudden jolt of pain from him hitting that spot making way for a wave of pleasure as he filled her up once more. She let out a long sigh, her breasts pressing against the soft mattress as his hands roamed over her body, tweaking and pinching her nipples. The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the room as their pace sped up faster and harder each time. It felt like he was claiming her, marking her as his own, and it drove Lanie wild with need.

His fingers traced circular patterns on her belly, leaving goosebumps in their wake as she arched her back to take him deeper. His fingers found her clit and circled it before pinching down, causing her to jolt. His low groan, as he held her hips and pounded into her from behind, sent shivers down her spine, making her shudder with the anticipation of what was to come. As he whispered words of encouragement, telling her how wet she was, how tight, how much he loved hearing her beg for more, Lanie lost herself in the moment.

His hips pumped against her ass, taking her so close before pulling back. It felt amazing to be taken so roughly yet so tenderly at the same time; a contradiction that made perfect sense under his skilled touch.

Finally, he couldn't hold back anymore and shoved himself deep, saying, "You can come now, little one."

At Archer's words, Lanie's body shattered into a million pieces and she called his name as her orgasm rocked through her, her pussy clenching around him like a vice grip as he found his own release deep inside her.

He'd claimed her. They both knew it. Every roll of his hips, every whispered

command, every shuddering cry that left her lips had sealed the deal. It had been everything—everything she'd been afraid of; everything she'd wanted; and most importantly, everything she'd needed.

By the time it was over, she was boneless, her body completely spent, her mind hazy with pleasure. Archer didn't withdraw right away. He stayed inside her, his body pressed against hers, his lips brushing the side of her neck in a quiet, possessive kiss. Lanie exhaled softly, her fingers curling into the sheets. For the first time in years, she felt whole.

Archer shifted, withdrawing and rolling onto his back, pulling her against his chest, tucking her beneath his arm. His grip was firm, possessive, his lips pressing one last kiss to her forehead before he whispered, "Sleep, little one."

And this time, she did.

Lanie woke to the feel of warm, solid heat at her back. Archer's arm, heavy and possessive, draped over her waist, anchoring her in place. His breath was a slow, steady rhythm against the back of her neck, his body curled around hers in a way that left no room for escape—not that she wanted one.

For the first time in years, she wasn't waking up to fear. She wasn't flinching at the sound of footsteps outside her door or the phantom feeling of hands that didn't belong. She was completely and utterly safe. And it had nothing to do with the security system, the armed Cerberus agents posted outside, or the gun Archer kept within arm's reach.

It had everything to do with the man himself. Lanie let out a soft breath, shifting slightly, just enough to turn in his arms. Archer stirred, his grip tightening, as if even in sleep, he refused to let her go.

His face was relaxed in the early morning light, all the sharp, commanding edges

softened. He looked almost peaceful.

Almost.

Lanie reached up, running her fingers lightly over his jaw. He made a quiet noise, his eyes flickering open, locking almost immediately on her, sharp despite the haze of sleep.

She smiled. “Morning.”

Archer studied her for a long moment, then, without a word, he rolled, pinning her beneath him in one slow, controlled movement.

Lanie let out a breathless laugh. “You really don’t enjoy waking up alone, do you?”

His lips brushed over her throat, the rasp of his stubble making her shiver. “You’re mine,” he murmured against her skin. “Don’t need to wake up alone anymore.”

Something warm, wild, and undeniable unfurled within her. She slid her hands up his back, fingers tracing the powerful lines of his muscles. “Good,” she whispered. “Because I don’t want to run anymore.”

Archer stilled. He lifted his head, gaze burning into hers. “You sure?”

Lanie nodded. “I spent so much time trying to survive, I forgot what it was like to live. I don’t want to keep running from something—I want to run toward something.”

His jaw flexed, emotion flickering behind his gaze. “And what are you running toward, little one?”

She smiled, lifting a hand to his face. “You.”

Archer's fingers tangled in her hair, his grip just firm enough to make her breath catch. "Say it again."

Lanie swallowed, holding his gaze. "I'm done running. I love you, Archer."

A slow smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "That's good, and I love you, too. But just so we're clear, if you run, I will chase you. I will find you. And I will spank you so hard, you'll never be able to sit again."

Before she could respond, his lips crashed against hers, his kiss slow, consuming, like he was sealing the promise between them. She sighed into him, melting completely, surrendering in a way she never had before—not out of submission, but out of trust.

Because he was hers. And she was his. Forever.

An hour later, they remained tangled together when Archer's phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Archer muttered a curse, rolling to the side and grabbing it. Lanie curled against him, pressing a lazy kiss to his shoulder as he answered.

"Vaughn." A pause, then, "Yeah."

Another pause. A slow exhale. Lanie felt the change in him instantly. His body, relaxed just moments ago, went rigid beneath her touch. Archer didn't respond immediately. He listened, jaw tight, fingers flexing around the phone.

"I'll be there."

He hung up, tossing the phone onto the nightstand.

She sat up, pulling the sheet up around her. "What is it?"

“Seth’s been working non-stop on the data we retrieved from the Master’s Market. A self-destruct program destroyed much of the data, and Seth couldn’t stop it in time to save it all. But he got our IT team digging through what he could save, trying to find who was helping them find submissives at Club Southside and supplying them with information.”

“Who?”

“Tessa,” he said softly.

“Tessa? Lanie was shocked and hurt, but the revelation made perfect sense. Her position allowed her to identify potential submissive targets and eavesdrop on Cerberus’ plans. “She was my friend.”

Archer shook his head. “No, little one, she wasn’t. We’ve found emails that lead us to believe she’s the one who let Molina know where you were. Molina might be dead, but the Master’s Market isn’t.”

Her breath caught. “What?”

“They were bigger than we thought,” Archer said, rubbing a hand over his face. “Molina was just a recruiter, a middleman. King has leads on the real players behind the operation—the ones pulling the strings.”

Lanie’s heart pounded. “So, it’s not over.”

Archer’s gaze darkened. “It is for you, but no, not yet.”

For a moment, silence stretched between them. Then, slowly, Lanie reached for Archer’s hand.

He frowned. “Lanie...”

“I want in.”

His grip tightened, his jaw flexing. “Not happening.”

She lifted her chin. “Archer...”

“No.” His voice was firm. Absolute. “This isn’t your fight.”

Lanie narrowed her eyes. “Like hell it isn’t. They were going to sell me. How is that not my fight?”

Archer exhaled through his nose, frustration flashing in his eyes. “Lanie, I just got you back. I’m not putting you in the middle of this war.”

She sat up, the sheet pooling around her waist. “You don’t get to make that decision for me.”

Archer’s gaze snapped to hers. “You are mine, little one, and I protect what’s mine.”

Lanie’s breath hitched. “Then let me fight with you.”

Archer stared at her; his expression was unreadable.

She reached up, pressing her palm to his chest, feeling the steady, powerful beat of his heart. “I’m not asking to put myself in danger. But I can help. I can do more than just hide behind you. I need to do more than just hide behind you.”

His lips pressed into a thin line.

“Please,” she whispered. “Don’t put me in another kind of cage.”

A long silence. Then, finally, Archer let out a slow breath.

His hand cupped the back of her neck, tilting her head until her eyes locked onto his. “You’re mine,” he repeated, voice like gravel. “And you will obey me.”

Lanie swallowed hard. “And if I give you my word?”

He tilted his head slightly, considering. “I’ll let you in.”

A slow, victorious smile curled Lanie’s lips. She knew what that cost him. Knew how much he wanted to lock her away, to keep her safe. But he was giving her this because he trusted her.

She nodded. “Deal.”

Archer sighed, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “You think you’re a fighter, little one?”

Lanie lifted her chin, her dark eyes burning with determination. “I know I am.”

Archer let out a low, deep chuckle. Lanie grinned, her heart pounding with something new and exciting. She might submit to him, but that didn’t diminish her in his eyes. They were going to fight together, and they were going to finish this.