



The Darkness Within

(Shadows and Strings #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In the game of deception, who pulls the strings?

By day, I'm the tech visionary the world adores. By night, I'm the darkness that's haunting Detective Francesca DeMarco's dreams. She's hunting a killer. Im chasing my prey.

For months, I've watched Francesca's relentless pursuit of justice, my obsession growing with each case. The bodies I've left behind aren't just crimes for her to solve.

They're a trail leading her straight to me.

When I step out of the shadows and into Francesca's life, her world will change forever. She has no idea what's coming, but one thing is certain—once I have her, I'm never letting her go.

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CHAPTER ONE

Frankie

It's pouring buckets out here, an absolute downpour, and what am I doing? Not curled up cozy under my comforter like any sane person in L.A. would be at this ungodly hour. Oh, hell no, yours truly is standing in this rainstorm, already soaked to the bone, at yet another gruesome crime scene.

With a bitch of a hangover.

I should've just called it a night after clocking out last night, but how could I miss sending off Smitty in homicide as he transfers to take on organized crime? So instead of heading home, I spent the evening getting absolutely wasted, reliving the glory days of past investigations.

Fast forward to now, and I'm running on fumes, battling a wicked hangover with one measly cup of joe in my system. As I tug on some black nitrile gloves, I finally look at what dragged me out here in this miserable weather.

The poor sap looks maybe late 20s, early 30s tops. He probably considered himself quite the looker before someone worked him over really nasty. This was no clean job—guy got the drawn-out, agonizing end.

"This man was tortured," I say to no one in particular, my eyes roaming over the vicious wounds that mar his body. Squatting down to get a better look, I examine the wounds closely, I spot a few slash marks on his organs, which further confirm my

suspicion that this man was tortured.

This isn't the first ritualistic killing and even though the methods aren't exactly the same, I have a feeling it's the same murderous asshole and if so, this victim makes him a serial killer. "Bastard."

"Talking to yourself again, DeMarco?" My partner Jay's gravelly voice cuts through the rain.

I straighten up, my knees popping. Jay's blue eyes sparkle despite the ungodly hour. "I don't talk to myself. It's called taking notes. Maybe try it sometime," I say.

Jay chuckles, his salt-and-pepper hair plastered to his forehead. He's been my partner since my dad, his former partner, died when I was a kid. The department shrink would have a field day with that tidbit if I were dumb enough to wind up in a therapist's office.

Jay taps his temple with his forefinger. "Who needs notes when I have a steel trap memory?"

"Oh yeah? What did you have for breakfast yesterday?"

His brows, still a deep brown, dip into a frown. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I rest my case," I say in a self-satisfied tone. "Now, can we get back to the dead guy, please?"

I crouch next to the body and scan the DB's stomach, intestines, liver and colon laying out on top of him. "Multiple lacerations on the abdomen and chest. Possible torture," I mutter, more to myself than to Jay.

Jay leans in, his face inches from mine as he examines the wounds. “Yeah, and check out this puncture wound on his neck. Peri-mortem, I’d say.”

I nod, standing up and wincing as my knees protest. “Could be the cause of death.” I survey the area, noting the lack of blood. “No spatter or pooling. Body was definitely moved.”

“Yeah, this isn’t the primary crime scene.” Jay’s brow furrows as he scans the surroundings. “Damn rain might’ve washed away any trace evidence.”

I sigh, frustration bubbling up inside me. “We’ll have to rely on the autopsy. Hope the killer slipped up somewhere.”

As Jay steps away to talk to the uniforms, I take another look at the body. The cuts are too precise, too calculated. This guy knew what he was doing. A shiver runs down my spine, and it’s not from the rain. We’ve got a real sicko on our hands, and he’s got a head start. I just hope the rain hasn’t washed away our only chance to catch him.

“It’s him, Jay.” I know he doesn’t want to hear it, not yet. It’s too soon, that’s what he’s thinking, but I know that this is the same guy.

His lips pinch in that way they do when he’s preparing for a lecture. “You can’t possibly know that, Frankie.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know it yet, as in I wouldn’t swear to it in a court of law, but it’s him.” I can tell Jay’s not convinced. He’s old school and always reluctant to use the ‘s’ word because of what it means, which is usually federal investigators, task forces and a lot of fucking press. But I don’t care about any of that shit. I just want to catch this asshole.

“Jay,” I begin, digging in like the stubborn ass I’m known in the department to be.

“The kill methods aren’t exactly the same, but his modus operandi is already showing itself.”

Jay stands and removes his gloves, swiping his overgrown wavy hair from his face. “Explain.”

“This time he exposed the organs, sure, but the cuts are similar in type. Very sharp and precise cuts, which I’m sure Dr. Montgomery will confirm.” Chris Montgomery is the medical examiner, and he knows this killer almost as well as I do.

“Lots of crazy assholes with a fetish for knives, Frankie. You find a connection between the victims yet?”

I sigh, my frustration mounting. Is Jay going to pull rank on me and take the case in a different direction? Victimology isn’t my strong suit. “Not yet, but I’m still digging.”

I’m not sure how far back I’ll have to go to find out what connects these—now three—guys, but I know I’ll find it. I’m going to be the one to find this fucker and bring him to justice or put a bullet in his head to stop this mess.

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Frankie.” Here it comes. Jay pulling rank on me. I’m anything but a rookie, but the lead detective has the right to make the important decisions. “You want it to be the same guy, but we don’t have enough proof it’s a serial.”

I’m hungry, grumpy, and in desperate need of another cup of hot coffee. I’m also determined to prove to Jay that I’m right.

“Look,” he says. “You want another notch in your belt. I get it. I’ve been there. But we need the evidence.”

“You’re right,” I say reluctantly, “but I’ll get there.” Now I have even more motivation. I’m going to prove to Jay that I’m right and this creep is a fucking serial killer. He forgets I have my father’s DNA in my blood.

“Finally,” I growl when I spot the two blue vans that mark the arrival of the CSIs. “Where the hell have you guys been?” I ask when they approach the scene.

“Traffic.” Nate, my ex, answers with a casual shrug and a smirk that only pisses me off even more.

“Bullshit. This is the one time of day there is no traffic in this fucking city. It’s raining in case you haven’t noticed, and we need to get this shit collected and logged.”

“We don’t work for you, Frankie,” he growls in a familiar refrain that’s funnily enough, exactly how we ended up fucking and then in a relationship for a year longer than we should have been.

“No, you work for the people of Los Angeles, same as I do, and the rest of us managed to make it out here in a timely manner.”

He shrugs again as if this is no big deal. “I’m here now.”

Asshole. We had the same stupid arguments over the two years we were together, and he’s still the same irresponsible jerk I kicked to the curb six months ago.

“Good. Do your damn job,” I snap, annoyed that he’s late and so nonchalant about it. And to top it off, Nate’s panty-melting smile, which used to turn me on, now makes me want to throat-punch him.

“I’d love to. And maybe after this, we can grab breakfast at that diner you like.

Talk?"

Did I hear a purr in that invitation?

I scoff. "There's nothing to talk about, Nate."

Undeterred, he presses on. "I think there is. You know I do."

"I know you think there is, but there isn't. You can take your wandering dick elsewhere." I turn away, my stomach growling for more than just food.

"Forget him," Jay says in a low voice. "He's not worth it."

"I know, but I'm cold, tired, and hungry. And this fucking serial murderer is pissing me off."

"We don't know it's the same guy," Jay reminds me.

He's right, we don't know for sure. "It is but the only way to prove it is to find evidence that points to one killer for all three victims." My gaze scans the area that surrounds the St. Jude Fountain. The park is in the middle of downtown Los Angeles, but there are only two direct paths to the fountain. "The killer would need direct access if he's carrying a body," I say half to Jay but mostly to myself. "The north entrance leads to a bank, and he's shown himself too smart for such a rookie mistake." The guy is good at avoiding cameras, leaving evidence or any other ways we could potentially identify him.

"But the south entrance leads to a bunch of trendy shops," Jay grumbles. "Probably fit right in with those avocado-toast-eating hipsters."

"Damn, you are a grumpy old man." I laugh, even in this shitshow. "But think about

it, hipsters love technology. Cameras, sensors, and especially social media. We'll have a field day with their digital breadcrumbs."

Jay groans, but I clap him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll make it worth your while. Remember that prosciutto and egg puff pastry thing you loved? The shop is on this block."

Jay looks at his watch. "Fine. What time do they open? For a chance to see this bastard in action, I'll brave the hipsters. But it better be a damn good pastry."

"And the prosciutto," I remind him.

"Goes without saying, DeMarco."

In this job, you gotta find joy wherever you can. Unfortunately, it's usually hiding somewhere between dead bodies.

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CHAPTER TWO

Frankie

I enter the morgue, a smile plastered on my face despite the unpleasant surroundings. If we let the constant stream of death and brutality get to us, we'd be too emotionally wrecked to function. It's a delicate balance, one I've learned to maintain over the years.

Christopher Montgomery, the medical examiner, looks up from his desk, his piercing blue eyes sparkling with delight as his lips curve into a welcoming grin. "Detective DeMarco, is that really you?"

I raise an eyebrow, feigning offense. "Who else would it be, Doc? You expecting someone else?"

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Nah, it's just that smile. It's a rare sight these days. Got a new love interest or something? The overnight guys mentioned you were in quite the mood earlier."

I roll my eyes, knowing full well that by overnight guys, he means Nate. That lazy ass always gets under my skin. "You mean the same guys who showed up at the crime scene an hour after I was there while it was pouring rain, letting crucial evidence wash away with every freakin' raindrop?" I can feel my anger bubbling over, and I pause, inhale the coffee and let it go. "I've slept and showered and now I'm better. Coffee?"

“You’re a lifesaver, Frankie,” he says, gratefully accepting the steaming cup. He takes a generous sip before setting it down on his desk and picking up his ever-present tablet. “I had a hunch you’d want to fast-track this latest case, so I’ve been here since the crack of dawn. We got an ID on the latest victim. Ryder Beaumont.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “It took us days to identify the first two vics, so this is great. He has a record?”

“Yeah, but nothing major. Just a drunk and disorderly charge from a few years back.”

“Still, it’s a solid lead. Good work, Dr. Montgomery.” I jot down the name in my notebook, underlining it twice and scribbling background check , next to it. “Anything else I should know?”

Dr. Montgomery flashes me a grin that I recognize as his I’m about to geek out face. “Oh, I’m glad you asked, Detective. You’re gonna love this.”

I lean against his desk, bracing myself for the onslaught of medical jargon and all the gory details that are sure to follow. But that’s why I enjoy working with Dr. Montgomery. His enthusiasm for the science behind the madness is oddly comforting in a world filled with so much darkness.

“What do you got, Dr. Montgomery?”

“Frankie, call me Chris, please. Or I’ll start calling you Francesca.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say with a playful growl.

Dr. Montgomery’s teasing grin fades as he gets down to business. “Okay, so the perpetrator used a very sharp blade, likely a hunting or boning knife, to sever the penis in one clean slice. Could have even been a straight razor. It’s cleaner than I’ve

ever seen, but a knife was definitely used to disembowel the poor guy. A very sharp knife.”

I jot that down, my pen scratching against the paper.

“There’s more,” Montgomery continues, his gloved finger gesturing to the man’s face on the screen. “The killer used an industrial-strength adhesive, likely epoxy or something similar, to seal the victim’s mouth shut. But the eyes were left untouched, though, which differs from the Donovan case last week.”

I tap my pen against my chin, my mind going a mile a minute with the information. “So, the glue is the same, but the kill method is different.”

“The glue is similar, but forensics is breaking it down, so nothing concrete yet.”

“Okay. Anything else I need to know?”

Dr. Montgomery shakes his head. “Not right now. I’ve put a rush on toxicology and DNA analysis. With any luck, we’ll find something to help identify this bastard.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Doc—err, Chris .” The name feels strange on my tongue, too informal. But if there’s anyone who deserves a bit of familiarity, it’s the man who spends his days elbow-deep in death and decay.

“I’ll have my full report on your desk by tomorrow morning,” he promises. “In the meantime, try to get some rest, Detective. You look like you could use it.”

I snort, shoving my notebook back into my jacket pocket. Sleep is a luxury I can’t afford, not with a twisted psychopath leaving a trail of bodies across my city. But I appreciate the sentiment.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead, Doc. Or when this freak is behind bars. Whichever comes first.”

The doors swing open with a resounding thud and Jay saunters in, looking more haggard than he did in the middle of the night. The shit-eating grin plastered on his face tells me he deliberately arrived late to dodge the gory details of the autopsy. Typical.

“Did you decide to sleep in on your first day in homicide, old man?” I jab, arching an eyebrow at him.

Jay’s eyes narrow into slits. “Watch it, kid. I’ll show you old man.” He raises a fist like a cartoon character itching for a fight. “So, what did I miss while you were playing teacher’s pet with the doc?”

I give him the Cliffs Notes version of my chat with the doctor as we exit the morgue. “You still not convinced it’s the same psycho behind all this?”

“I never said I didn’t think it was the same guy,” Jay says. “I’m just not ready to bet the farm on it being a solo act like you are. But the glue? That’s another check in the Frankie’s right again column.” He strokes his stubbled chin, pondering over my theory.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that you were right about the M.O. being the same even with the kill method isn’t.”

“So, you’re on board?” Jay is a damn fine detective with one of the highest close rates in the department, which is why it’s so important to have him on my side.

“But I’m also thinking that this could still be the work of two killers. We need to at least consider it while we figure out what makes him—or them—tick.”

“I’m driving,” I growl, annoyed that he’s still doubting me. We’ve been partners for enough years that he should trust my instincts the way I trust his.

Jay simply shrugs before folding his tall frame into the passenger seat. “Where are we going?”

I smile as I pull out into traffic. “We have a dick to find.” Heading toward the crime scene, my mind is on the killer and his victims. “What do you think makes a guy like this tick?”

“Fucked in the head would be my guess,” Jay answers easily. He’s a black and white kind of guy when it comes to the psychological stuff, and while he relies it on to find his killer, he doesn’t care for it all that much.

I sigh. “I’m serious, Jay. This feels like a vendetta.”

“Maybe, but we can’t say that if we can’t link the crimes, DeMarco.” He sighs and turns to me. “Look, I’m not doubting you, Frankie. I’m just saying that we need more. Find a link between the victims and the crimes and I’m on board. I’ll be the first to let the city know we have a serial killer on the loose.”

“I hear you, Jay. But my gut is screaming at me that this is one sick son-of-a-bitch with a twisted agenda. The staging, the signatures...it’s too goddamn specific to be a coincidence.”

I take a sharp turn, tires screeching against the asphalt and park. “I’ve been doing this job long enough to know when something doesn’t smell right. And this case? It reeks like a dumpster full of day-old fish.”

Jay holds up his hands in mock surrender. “All right, all right. I’m not saying you’re wrong, Frankie. Hell, you’ve got the best instincts in the department. I’m just playing devil’s advocate here.”

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that Jay’s always been on my side. He’s had my back from the start. “I know, Jay. I really do appreciate it. But we’re up against a grade-A psychopath here. The kind that gets off on playing God and watching us scramble like ants.”

I step out of the car, my eyes sweeping the park. Crime scene tape still flutters in the breeze, and the uniforms keep the onlookers at bay.

“We’ll find the link, Jay. And when we do, I swear, I’m gonna be the one to slap the cuffs on this bastard and watch him rot in a cell for the rest of his miserable life.”

I mentally run through the case details again, searching for that elusive thread connecting these victims. All men, all seemingly healthy. Late 20s to early 30s. All in L.A., though in different neighborhoods and social circles. Nothing obvious tying them together.

“He’s smart, Jay. Meticulous. This has been in the works for a while,” I say, scanning the busy street. My eyes flick from face to face—couples lost in their own worlds, a jogger bouncing on his toes at the crosswalk, the usual scene. “But everyone slips up, eventually. And when he does, we’ll nail the son of a bitch.”

Jay shoots me a grin as he climbs out of the car. “That’s gotta fill your murder cop BINGO card, right?”

I snort out a laugh. Gallows humor is a job requirement in homicide. Without it, the darkness would swallow us whole.

“DeMarco?” Jay’s voice snaps me back to the present.

“Yeah?”

“If you were a dick, where would you hide?”

CHAPTER THREE

Damien

I slip out of bed, the cool hardwood floor beneath my feet sending a delicious shiver up my spine. The cold sensation invigorates me, a stark contrast to the heat of anticipation burning in my veins. I down a quick cup of coffee before pulling on my running gear.

I stayed at my penthouse in downtown L.A. for this very run, hoping to catch a glimpse of her—my Francesca.

I step out into the crisp morning air, taking a deep breath. The scent of last night's rain lingers, mixing with the usual city smells. A hint of exhaust, a whiff of ocean. A smile tugs at my lips as I start my run. Today is going to be a day to remember.

I take off at a brisk pace, my feet hitting the pavement in a steady rhythm. My heart rate climbs, blood pumping hard through my veins. I embrace the rush, letting it feed my excitement. It's moments like these when I feel truly alive, in control of my fate.

I can almost pretend to be one of them . Just another face in the crowd, out for a morning jog. They don't know who or what I truly am. They don't see the monster lurking beneath the handsome facade. But if they look closely enough and peer behind the mask, they'll see a face that will make their blood run cold.

A face that should fucking terrify them.

The city blurs past me in a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes. I weave through the alleys and side streets as the sun glints off the steel and glass towers that loom above me.

I check my smartwatch. An hour has passed since I left my apartment. Almost showtime.

I round the corner onto Maple Street, and slow to a jog as I approach St. Jude Park, keeping my breathing even despite the excitement in my gut. Can't look too eager or give the game away too soon.

I time it perfectly, reaching the park as a familiar dark sedan glides up to the curb. Francesca DeMarco steps out, all long legs and determined grace. Frankie to her friends on the force, Detective DeMarco to the fools who think they matter. But to me? She's so much more. My adversary, my muse, my obsession. My revenge.

I can't take my eyes off her as she stands before the fountain, her keen gaze sweeping the area, no doubt searching for more traces of Ryder Beaumont. The memory of his butchered corpse, pale and destroyed, sends a thrill down my spine. That body and the others I've left in my wake link us together, Francesca and me.

An unbreakable bond forged in blood and darkness. She doesn't realize it yet, but she belongs to me. And I to her, in a way.

But I force myself to be patient, to savor the slow burn of our deadly dance. The game is far from over, and I still have a symphony of horrors yet to orchestrate for my beloved Frankie.

She believes she's the hunter, but little does she know I'm the one holding the puppet strings. I'm the maestro, and she's the unwitting star of my demented play.

Francesca and her partner linger by the fountain, no doubt searching for Beaumont's severed cock. I sliced it off with surgical precision, a mocking tribute left behind. But they won't find it. Not unless I want them to.

And watching them search, seeing the determined set of Francesca's jaw, the fire in her eyes, puts a smile on my face. Her determination is admirable but futile. A fool's errand. She wants to catch me so badly she can taste it.

I've seen it in the tick of her jaw when the press confronts her, the frustration simmering in her captivating brown eyes when she has no answers to give.

Keep trying, my pet. Keep chasing me. You'll catch up to me eventually, but only when I'm ready.

Until then, I'll be watching. Waiting. Savoring every moment of our twisted existence. Just thinking about my plan has my cock swelling in my joggers.

I can't wait to make Francesca mine. Make her submit to me. I crave her. Aside from my other plans, she's all I can think about lately. Seducing her. Fucking her. Making her mine so that I can destroy her.

Frankie and her colleague disappear as I sprint along the park's perimeter, but I still sense her presence. She's completely fixated on me, the murderer, trying to decode my mind and why I killed that guy.

A grin spreads across my face as I recall the pathetic whimpers and pleas that went with my blade slicing through his shrinking cock. The wide, disbelieving eyes that saw me taking away what he cherished most—it was a rush. Now, watching Francesca trying to piece it together, I get to relive it all over again.

I increase my pace, pumping my arms and legs harder to round the park and make it

to the other side of the fountain. Jogging in place for a few minutes, I come to an abrupt stop at the park's north entrance as I watch her.

I blend in perfectly with the crowd of joggers and parkgoers, all of us taking advantage of the post-rain sunshine. I stand and stare while I stretch my hamstrings and then my quads and arms, soaking up the conversation between Frankie and her partner. I can hear her slightly husky voice as she tries to unravel the mystery. Of me. Trying to find the thread that connects those assholes, but I've made sure she'll never find it. I'm meticulous, leaving nothing to chance, and it's a damn good thing because a detective like Francesca, with her razor-sharp intellect and relentless determination, is a worthy opponent.

For once.

She's frustrated by her lack of progress, and I understand that because it's my job to confound her. It's taken years to plan my revenge, and I won't let anyone stand in my way.

Not even you, kitten.

Detective DeMarco turns and scans the growing crowd, and I swear her gaze collides with mine. The impact for me is like being struck by a Mack truck, but with my sunglasses on she can't tell if I'm watching her or rubbernecking like all the others. But I sense the connection with such intensity and rawness, as if there is a tether binding us, and the tingling sensation on my skin assures me that I'm alive, almost as alive as when I'm hunting. Or killing.

Almost .

With a knowing smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth, I break the staring contest first and smile at Francesca. Does she see me? I can't tell for sure, but I think that

little grin playing on her full, luscious lips is meant just for me. A secret acknowledgment of the twisted game we're playing.

My watch beeps, telling me it's time to put on my daytime mask as Damien Wolfe, the handsome and charming, smart-as-a-whip software developer who rules over the tech industry with an iron fist in a velvet glove.

I jog away from the crime scene and back to my penthouse, where I shed my sweaty clothes and step into a steaming hot shower. The scalding water pours over me, washing away any trace of the dark deeds I've committed.

I dress carefully in a perfectly tailored Armani suit, the fine Italian fabric sliding over my skin like armor. It completes the mask I wear for roughly twelve hours each day, the facade of a successful, respectable businessman. I love the way it feels on my body. It's smart, sophisticated, and powerful.

No one would ever suspect the monster lurking beneath the designer labels and megawatt smile. And that's exactly how I like it.

I stride into my office, my mind buzzing with the thrill of last night's kill. Another name crossed off The List, another asshole permanently removed from this world. It's a thrill, knowing I can dispense justice where the system fails.

Jess, my assistant, jumps to attention as I exit the elevator, her heels clicking rapidly on the marble floor as she rushes to my side.

"Mr. Wolfe," she says, a vision in pink. Jess looks more like a real housewife of wherever than she does the best damn executive assistant I've ever had. I'd be lost without her.

"Good morning," she continues, keeping step with me. Word on the street is that

Justin Storm is considering selling, and you're scheduled to meet with him at 11 today.

I freeze, my eyes narrow. "Where did you hear that?"

In my world, information is currency, and I pride myself on always being one step ahead. The thought that something could have slipped past me deeply unsettles me.

Jess shrugs, unfazed by my intensity. "I ran into his assistant last night at On the Rocks. Poor thing is overworked and underappreciated, and I'm a good listener," she explains with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I chuckle. "Am I paying you enough?"

"Can one ever be paid too much?" she says with an easy laugh as she follows me into my sprawling corner office. The view of downtown LA never fails to take my breath away, but my eyes quickly return to the portfolio Jess sets on my desk.

"Anyway, I put together a portfolio of what he has, highlighting what I think would most interest you. The research on reactivating neural pathways, which was scrapped for cost not bad science," she adds. "There's not much time before he arrives," she says, glancing at her watch before setting down the coffee mug and leaving me at peace to look over her research.

I lean back in my leather chair and take a moment to savor the news. Oh, the money I could make with technology like this. The secrets I could uncover, the enemies I could unmake. A slow, wicked smile spreads across my face.

Justin Storm has no idea who he's dealing with. But he will. Soon enough, they all will.

I lift the dossier Jess had left, skimming through it, but my mind stubbornly drifts back to the captivating detective. Seeing her in the flesh is far more enticing than the glimpses on the nightly news. She's slender yet robust, a woman who cultivates strength, ready to defend herself with or without her firearm. She's stunning, but in a city like L.A., attractive faces are a dime a dozen, and Francesca is more than just another pretty face.

She's smart. Shrewd. An exceptional detective.

And I'm ready to bring her down.

My mind floods with visions of pinning her beneath me, driving into her hard and deep as she cries out for more, scratching and clawing at my back, driven wild by my touch.

When she comes all over me, will her eyes be a deep, rich brown or a light amber hue? The fear that flashes in her eyes when I wrap my hand around her throat makes my cock twitch.

Will I end her life then and there, or will I give her the best orgasm of her life?

Maybe both.

Maybe not.

Francesca has no idea what's in store for her, but I can hardly contain myself. It's time to kick it up a notch. My need to have her, to own her, to destroy her is bubbling to the surface, and there's only one way to simmer it.

Get closer.

A quick knock sounds on the door before Jess enters, a smile playing on her lips.
“Storm is here, so consider this your five-minute warning.”

“Thank you, Jess.” The games never cease, but while I enjoy the daylight games, it’s the ones at night that fuel my vengeance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frankie

“If I don’t get some coffee soon, I’m going to collapse right here in the park.” I’m so worn out I can barely keep my eyes open. We’ve spent the entire morning searching St. Jude’s Park for the appendage that the twisted bastard cut off Ryder Beaumont and found nothing. Not a single clue.

“Lucky for you, I know the perfect place.” Jay gestures for me to follow him, and I do without question because as long as I get coffee, I can handle anything. “Beans & Things is just up the street.”

The name of my favorite coffee spot brings a smile to my face. “You don’t even need to ask.” The tan and brown awning is just a few blocks away, and since I can’t stop thinking about this case and the killer, we pause half a dozen times on the way. “You think we’ll find the dick?”

Jay’s expression tells me everything, but his words make it clear. “Nope. He chopped it off for a reason. Maybe he’s keeping them in jars, or maybe he’s eating them, but he’s definitely not tossing them in the trash, that’s for fucking sure.”

I nod. “We’re missing something. I can feel it.” It seems like it’s right there, but still completely out of reach. Maybe it’s lack of sleep and therefore lack of focus, or maybe this guy is just that good.

Jay loosens his tie and picks up the pace. “We don’t have enough information yet to

know much of anything, Frankie. I know you want this guy caught, but without linking the victims and without forensic evidence, we can't do much."

"I don't like the sound of that." I'm not good at waiting. As if to prove my point that I'm terrible at patience when it comes to shit like this, a red light at the corner stops our forward progress. I push the button, hoping to speed up the change to the green light. Jay gives me the side eye and I smirk.

"What?" I say like I don't know what he means.

I like to forge ahead, cutting through red tape and bullshit to get to the answers, to get the perp. To get justice for the victims. But Jay has heard my story about my LAPD ID badge opening every door in the city, but it can't get me across a red light to save my soul. Well, unless I'm chasing a perp and then, all bets are off.

Jay laughs. "You've never been all that great at the waiting aspect of law enforcement. Your father was the same way."

As always, the mention of my father stops me in my tracks. He's been gone for more years now than I had with him, and when Jay brings him up, it always catches me off guard. In some ways, it feels like I hardly think about him, which is strange because if not for him, I wouldn't be where I am today. "So, you're saying my impatience is a genetic trait?"

"I'm saying don't let the lack of progress get you down. The worst part of working a serial case is that the only way to get a better picture of the perp is more evidence."

I nod as the light changes, and we hurry across the street to Beans & Things. "More evidence means more fucking victims," I grumble.

Jay's right, of course. "Yep."

“That’s why you hate these cases?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

He nods, eyes scanning the crowds outside the bars and restaurants like he’s casing the joint. “It’s the main reason I hate them, yeah. You know what this city, hell this county is like. More criminals than I can fucking swing a bat at and a lot of ‘em haven’t been caught.” His jaw tightens, anger simmering just below the surface.

I let out a chuckle. “If that was supposed to be a pep talk, your game needs work, Hawkins.”

The corner of his mouth quirks up in that crooked grin of his as he opens the door to the coffee shop. “It wasn’t a pep talk, it was reality.”

“Ew, gross. Zero stars. Don’t recommend.” I step inside Beans & Things and the familiar scents put me at ease, a smile splitting my face. I inhale deeply, the scent of coffee beans mixed with hot milk, the warm buttery scent of fresh pastries. It’s familiar and so welcome, I instantly feel better. “Coffee,” I growl. “I need coffee.”

“We’re in the right place,” Jay deadpans from behind me.

I shoot him a glare over my shoulder, but before I can fire back at his snark, I slam right into a solid wall of muscle. Hot coffee splashes onto my shirt and I jump back. “Hey! Watch it,” I snap, irritation flaring as I take in the stain rapidly spreading across my top.

The man is easily over six feet tall, incredibly fit with thick brown hair perfectly styled. His hazel eyes swirl with shades of green and gold, full of apology. “I am so sorry, ma’am. I didn’t see you. Here, let me help you.”

His voice is a low, gravelly rumble that sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. Handsome doesn’t even begin to cover it—he looks like he stepped straight off the

cover of a romance novel with that chiseled jaw and pretty pink lips framed by scruff. The expensive suit hints at money and status.

Tall, dark and panty-melting gorgeous is more like it. I give myself a mental shake, refocusing. “Don’t worry about it,” I say after dragging my eyes away from his distractingly attractive face. “All good.” I try to sidestep around him, but he blocks my path.

“I feel really terrible. At least let me pay for your dry cleaning?” That heart-stopping smile does absolutely nothing to sell the offer.

“Don’t worry about the shirt. I got it at Target.” I flash a smile, not to ease his guilt, but to end the conversation.

But his grin only widens, all pearly whites. “It looks good on you, and it’d be a shame if I don’t replace it.” The flirtatious tone grates on my nerves even as I grudgingly admit the guy has charm in spades.

Unfortunately for him, I’m immune. “Thanks, but it really isn’t necessary.” I move to go around him again, but he shifts, cutting me off once more.

“I insist,” he counters smoothly, that infuriatingly perfect smile not stopping.

“I insist on getting coffee.” I push the words through gritted teeth, my jaw clenched tight. This guy is really working my last nerve. “We’re good. Seriously.” Some women might eat up this pushy, relentless act, thinking it means he’s interested when it’s just an ego trip for most men. “Shit. That could be it,” I say under my breath as my focus shifts back to the case. Maybe my perp has a history of sexual abuse fueling his twisted urges to torture his victims like this.

The nuisance flashes another dazzling grin. “I’ll buy your coffee. And anything else

you'd like."

I roll my eyes, quickly weighing my options. If I was just some civilian, I might let him buy me the damn coffee and a bear claw just to end this ridiculous interaction. But I'm a cop, and I know exactly where letting guys like this buy you things inevitably leads. "Look, I accept your apology, okay? No need to throw money at me to make up for it."

For the briefest second, something dark and sinister flashes in his hazel eyes before vanishing. But I've seen that look before...in the eyes of killers. I push that thought aside. I'm just projecting after obsessing over this case. "It wasn't my intention to throw money at it," he says smoothly. "But I feel terrible that my carelessness ruined your shirt. You serve our city. The least I can do is replace that blouse."

Okay, now I'm irritated. This joker is smooth as hell with just the right mix of charm and looks. But I've dealt with enough manipulative dirtbags to recognize the game.

"I appreciate that, but it's really fine," I say. "Hazard of the job. I can't even count how many shirts I've tossed after being ruined at crime scenes or chasing down idiots dumb enough to run from the cops." I flash him a tight smile. "It's all part of the glamor of being a homicide detective."

I offer one last tight smile and slip past the rich asshole when a couple heads for the exit, forcing us all to shift and make room. "Coffee is calling me. Take it easy," I tell him briskly and rush to the counter without a look back.

"You know that guy?" Jay poses the question when he catches up with me at the counter, nodding towards Mr. Moneybags.

I give him a dismissive frown over my shoulder. "That guy? No. Just a random rich guy who wanted to buy me a new blouse." I tug at the large coffee stain down the

middle of my blue blouse, cursing to myself. “He’s very pushy and pissing me off. Jeez.”

Jay’s glance flickers down to the stain. “I hope you let him. That shirt’s a goner.”

“Very funny.” I practically leap at the counter when the barista calls my name, grabbing the tallest cup of black coffee they have and taking a big, reviving gulp. “Delicious. So, I was thinking about our perp. Maybe he’s a victim of sexual abuse himself, acting out some twisted revenge fantasy.”

Jay frowns and shakes his head, the old man crease forming between his brows. “You know, Frankie, it’s okay if you want to get a private life. It won’t make you a worse cop, might make you better.”

“Seriously, Jay? You too?” Why in the hell is everyone so damn worried about my personal life lately? “You sound like Amelia, and I’ll tell you like I told her, after Nate, I’m on a fast. A man cleanse.”

“Antibiotics?” He smirks.

I roll my eyes. “Thankfully, no. Or else we’d have another murder to investigate.” The sting of Nate’s betrayal doesn’t hurt the way it did right after the brutal breakup, but men just require more effort than I’m willing to put in right now. Possibly, ever again if I’m being honest with myself.

“What was wrong with that guy? He’s good-looking enough and he’s clearly rich and interested. What else do you want?” Jay presses.

“The will or the energy to bother with men at all,” I shoot back, taking another sip of coffee. “Between the job that consumes me and this damn case, I just don’t have it in me to play games or deal with fragile egos.”

He rolls his eyes, grabbing his coffee and we head out the door. “You’re too young to be so cynical. I was on my third divorce before I reached that level.”

I bat my eyelashes dramatically. “What can I say, I’m a fast learner.”

Jay laughs as he sips his black coffee. “That’s not the flex you think it is, as the kids say.”

I stop and stare at him. “Are you seeing a younger woman now?”

He tosses the wooden coffee stirrer into the trash. “We’re not talking about me right now.”

“We could be, if there’s someone you want to talk about,” I prod. It’s rare for Jay to be so evasive.

“I don’t,” he answers quickly, that telltale flush creeping up his neck. “But you’re young. Don’t you want to get married and have kids someday?”

“In this line of work? You must be insane.” I shake my head. The very idea seems ludicrous. “Leaving a man in charge when I run off in the middle of the night to a crime scene? Being consumed with a killer over and over again? No, thanks. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

“So cynical,” he grumbles as we exit Beans & Things, both of us lost in our own thoughts as we head back to the car.

“This is just what I needed.” I sip the hot liquid and as my neurons start firing on all cylinders again and I go right back to the perp. “So, sex assault?”

Jay groans, running a hand over his weary face before taking a gulp of his own

coffee. “It’s a good thought with the chopped off Johnson, but we should keep it on the possibility list until we have more intel.”

A knot forms in my stomach at the thought of another victim, another life lost. “I don’t like the idea of hoping for someone else to die.” The words leave a sour taste in my mouth. It doesn’t sit right, wishing tragedy on an innocent just to crack this case.

“That’s the thing about potential serial killers, Frankie.” Jay’s voice takes on a fatherly tone. Again, and it kind of pisses me off. “Hope or not, they will kill again. It’s what they do. It is in their nature. You have no control over it, no matter how much you wish otherwise.”

I let out a heavy sigh and nod. He’s right. Tunnel vision will only blind me further. I need to step back, look at this from every angle.

“I’m heading back to the station to do a deep dive into Ryder Beaumont and the other two victims. See if I can put them together somehow.”

“You do that.” Jay grunts as he slides into the passenger seat. “I’m going home to get ready for my date. One of us has to have a life.”

I roll my eyes and merge into traffic, my mind on the killer. What motivates him? Why does he do what he does? Does he know these victims personally or do they have something else in common I haven’t uncovered yet?

CHAPTER FIVE

Damien

Sweet, naive Francesca. She has no idea what's coming. I watch her saunter away, that sway of her hips that screams both seasoned cop and seductive temptress.

Efficient strides, yet undeniably feminine. My eyes track her to the counter, drinking in the way she flashes that guileless smile at the young barista. My cock throbs painfully against my zipper as I savor these stolen moments when she doesn't know she's being watched. If only she knew.

"Excuse me." Her partner deliberately jostles me, a flicker of suspicion in his eyes before he joins Francesca.

I study their casual interaction, easy banter and camaraderie. The bond of partners, a united front. For now. But every union can be broken, with the right pressure applied to the fault lines. I'll drive the wedge between them, make Francesca question his loyalty, his motives. Until she trusts no one but me. But that's for later. Now, I watch. Catalog every minute detail of my beautiful obsession.

Her smile slips, a crease forming between her brows. She's thinking of me, her phantom killer, the one who haunts her waking thoughts and invades her dreams. If she only knew I'm just a breath away, close enough to inhale her scent and feel the frustration rolling off her.

I slip out onto the sidewalk, dropping into one of the coffee shop's steel chairs. I pull

out my phone, mimicking the mindless drones around me. But my eyes aren't on the screen. They're locked on Francesca.

The coffee shop door swings open and she walks out, her partner a step behind. "This is just what I needed," she sighs, the weariness in her voice making her careless. Oblivious to the potential threats around her. To the predator mere inches away, drinking in her presence like a fine wine. So, trusting. So vulnerable.

I palm my straining erection through my slacks and head back inside, my mask firmly in place as I appraise the trio of baristas. The one with the nose ring is too jaded, too cynical. The blonde is too eager, desperation rolling off her in waves. But the perky one with the wild curls is perfect. Bubbly and naive, blind to the darkness of the world. Putty in my skilled hands.

"Hi there," she chirps, her smile wide and genuine. "Back for another fix already?"

I flash my most disarming grin, the one that puts people instantly at ease. "I'm afraid I accidentally bumped into the lovely detective and spilled my coffee."

"Of course," she beams, already reaching for a cup. "Columbiano, black, right?"

"Impressive memory..." I check her nametag, "Wendy. Thank you."

A pretty blush stains her cheeks, and she ducks her head, pleased with herself. "It's my pleasure, really." Her smile reaches her eyes.

"Beauty and brains," I say. "I bet the boys are just lining up to take you out."

She fidgets, suddenly self-conscious. "I wish. They're not exactly beating down my door."

Shy. Unaware of her own allure. I can certainly use that. “And how old are you, Wendy? Twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-one. Why do you ask?”

“Men your age can be such fools. They chase after the shiny, flashy types.” I nod toward the blonde barista, all push-up bra and fake smiles. “When what they really want—what we all want, in the end—is a woman like Detective DeMarco. Stunning, brilliant, tough as nails.”

Wendy’s eyes widen. “I know, right? She’s such a total badass, but still looks amazing, even after a long shift. Who knew lady cops could be so hot?”

“You know her well, then?”

She leans in, eager to share her secrets with a sympathetic ear. “Oh, not well, but she’s in here a lot. Like clockwork, every morning at nine on the dot. Sometimes, she comes in with the older guy—her partner, I think. They always get matching Americanos, black. It’s kind of their thing.”

I don’t even have to push. Wendy spills Francesca’s secrets willingly, desperate to impress. “Sounds like you’ve got quite the memory. Ever thought about becoming a detective yourself?”

“Me?” she laughs, flattered by the suggestion. “Thanks, but I don’t think I’m cut out for that. I just pay attention, I guess.” She preens under the praise, standing a little taller. “You know, you’re a real nice guy, mister. I don’t meet a lot of guys like you.”

“I do my best.” I flash another megawatt smile. “And while I’m at it, I think I’ll grab one of those ham and Swiss baguettes. Detecting is hungry work, or so I’ve heard.”

As she rings up my order, she can't seem to stop talking, the words just tumbling out. "Detective DeMarco usually skips the weekends, though. I guess she's probably only here this late because of that body they found in the park. You know, the one that's been all over the news?"

I widen my eyes, feigning shock. "A body? In the park?"

Wendy nods, eyes round as saucers. "Yeah, I heard it was just dumped there, right by the fountain. One of our delivery guys said the vic was all cut up, gutted like a damn fish."

I shake my head, clicking my tongue in manufactured sympathy. "How awful. Things like that...they're not supposed to happen. Not in this neighborhood."

"It's terrible, right?" Wendy shudders delicately as I tap my card. "I mean, whoever did that...the guy must have seriously pissed someone off, don't you think? To do something like that?"

"I'm sure you're right." I agree, fighting the urge to laugh at the sheer irony of it all. If she only knew she was face to face with the very monster who delivered the brutal justice Ryder Beaumont so richly deserved. "I appreciate the coffee and the sandwich, Wendy." I slip an extra-large bill into her tip jar—a little something to remember me by. To make an impression.

"Thank you, Mr. Wolfe. Have a great day." She hands me my receipt with a smile, not even a flicker of recognition in her eyes.

I slip out of the coffee shop, an anonymous face in the thinning crowd. It's a short walk, just two blocks to the garage where I left my black Mercedes.

Twenty minutes later I'm entering Detective DeMarco's Hollywood neighborhood.

My new Hollywood neighborhood, too. The second the news broke about Gavin Kowalski, Francesca's face flashed across every news channel, and I knew it was time to make my move.

I bought the perfect house. The ideal vantage point to watch my beautiful prey, to savor our intimate moments through the unwitting invitation of her open windows.

The house was on the market for just over a year, abandoned by the children of the elderly owner after her death. The back yard butts up to Francesca's back yard. When I saw this home, I knew I had to have it. Just a block wall between us, the only barrier to everything I crave.

A wall and so many dirty, filthy secrets.

For reasons I'll never understand, Francesca never bothers to close her blinds, not even to sleep. Maybe she enjoys the kiss of the night breeze on her skin. Or maybe, deep down in some dark, hidden corner of her mind, she wants to be seen. Lucky for me, I'm more than happy to oblige. And she doesn't even know I'm here, watching. Wanting.

Her bedroom light flicks on, slicing through the darkness, and she dumps her oversized bag onto the bed. Nimble fingers make quick work of the buttons on her coffee-stained blouse, revealing the tantalizing curves of her breasts, barely held by black lace. A bra that's begging to be slowly torn off with my teeth.

In an instant, I'm rock hard, my cock straining almost painfully against my zipper. I palm myself roughly through my slacks, eyes riveted as Francesca shimmies out of her slacks to reveal high-cut black lace panties. "My pet loves lacy things," I purr to her. She turns away, her fine ass on display just for me. "Fuck, yes, baby. Show me everything. Don't be shy now."

The wicked, forbidden thrill of our clandestine little peep show has my cock throbbing, aching with a bone-deep need. My imagination runs wild, spinning out vivid fantasies of our sweat-slicked bodies tangled together in the sheets.

The stubborn little furrow between her brows as she concentrates. I'll smooth that worry from her forever. The thought brings a smile to my lips.

My hand dips into my slacks, wrapping around my throbbing cock. I imagine those bedroom eyes of hers dilating with lust as she submits to me. I'll have her on her knees, my cock sliding down her throat until she's gagging, those big, beautiful eyes watery with tears. But she'll be smiling, a fierce, defiant smile. That spark of spirit will be the first thing I crush.

I pull my cock out, my fist pumping slow and steady strokes as I picture her bent over, hands spreading her asscheeks as I slide my cock into that virgin asshole. I'll sink into her slowly, patiently until she begs me for more and then I'll give her what she wants. The man. The monster. She'll cry out my name, but it won't be from pain.

"You like that, kitten?" I whisper, my fist flying faster as I imagine her sweet, slick heat wrapped around me. "You'll take it all, won't you? Every fucking inch." Her pussy, a plump, wet oasis, beckons to me. I picture sinking into her, her walls clutching at me, begging for more. "That's it, baby. Ride my cock. Take it all."

A tremor rocks my body as I stroke harder, faster. I can't stop thinking about having her all to myself.

Owning her. Mind, body and soul.

"You'll never get enough, will you? Always wanting more. More of me." I growl. "You'll never want another. I'll brand myself into your soul, make you mine forever."

The image of Francesca's lush body splayed out beneath me is too much to bear. "Fuck, Francesca. My perfect, dirty little fuck toy. Can't wait to wreck that filthy cunt."

Pleasure coils hot and tight at the base of my spine. My whole body trembles, practically vibrating out of my skin with the need to taste her, fuck her, make her mine. A groan builds in my throat, and I grit my teeth to keep quiet. Can't have the whole fucking neighborhood hear me claiming what's mine.

"Fuck, Francesca, yes! Gonna fucking ruin you. Ahh, Christ." Even as I shoot my load, I know it's only a taste of what's coming. She'll be screaming my name soon enough. In pleasure. In pain. It's all the same to me.

My back arches and my legs tremble as I paint my fist with thick ropes of come. It feels like it goes on forever. It's the most intense orgasm I've had outside of actually fucking. And it's all because of her. My Francesca. My goddess. My ultimate obsession.

As she turns to head for the bathroom, I'm treated to one last perfect view of that delectable ass, my favorite part of her body.

Suddenly, the distance between us feels unbearable. I need to be in her house, in her bed, inside her, anyway I can take her.

"Sweet dreams, Detective," I rasp to the empty room, my voice raw and ragged. "You and I will be seeing quite a bit of each other. Very, very soon."

CHAPTER SIX

Frankie

“Thought you could use a little pick-me-up, Ames,” I say, walking into the office of Amelia Novak, the department’s top criminal psychologist. I paste a goofy grin on my face as I hold up the green and white paper bag holding her favorite breakfast.

“I know how engrossed you get in your work, trying to unravel the twisted minds of those psychos we send to you.”

She chuckles, her eyes meeting mine. “You know me too well, Frankie. But seriously, you didn’t have to go out of your way. I’m always here for you, whether you come bearing gifts or not.”

I shrug, handing over the bag and then setting down two steaming cups of coffee, one for each of us. “What can I say? I like to keep my favorite criminal psychologist well-fed and happy. Never know when I might need that brilliant, slightly unhinged brain of yours. And I figured we could use the caffeine hit.”

I flop into the chair across from her desk, ignoring the plush sofa against the wall. “I think we got a serial this time,” I sigh. “At least I’m pretty sure it’s the same creep flaying all three vics, but Jay says we don’t have enough evidence. He’s right, of course.”

She nods, digging into the bag and dropping back into her desk chair. She spreads a thick layer of cream cheese on each side of the bagel and takes a large bite, savoring

it with a satisfied groan. “Okay, what do you know so far?”

I take a sip of my coffee. “Two nights ago, I was called to a crime scene for this guy, Beaumont. I’m fairly certain it’s DB number three from this psycho, which technically makes it a serial.”

“But?” she asks, raising an eyebrow as she takes another bite of bagel.

I smile and grab the other half of the bagel, taking a bite. “But the kill methods differ. Similar tools, eerily similar M.O.”

“And that’s where you’re stuck? The method of killing?”

I nod, swallowing another sip of coffee. “Yeah. I’m sure it’s the same guy, but I can’t prove it. Yet.”

I feel like I’m spinning my wheels, and it’s infuriating to have Jay slow me down with his follow-the-rules approach. That’s why I’ve come to talk to Amelia.

She narrows her eyes. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but have you considered the possibility of two killers, like the Hillside Stranglers? That could explain the similar but not identical kills.”

“That’s possible,” I say, though I don’t believe it. “But it feels like it’s the same guy and I’m just missing something.”

She wipes crumbs from her mouth and says, “No offense, but there’s a lot you’re missing, right? No solid link between the victims, and no link between the crimes except it’s eerily similar, right? That makes it damn near impossible to ID a killer, especially without enough evidence.”

“Gee, thanks.” I scowl at her. She sounds like Jay. I take another bite of my bagel.
“You’re no help.”

“Seriously. This is your first serial, right?”

“Yeah. Spree killers, mass shootings, but first serial. Your point?”

She sips her coffee, musing. “My point is, it’s hard to know so early. You said it yourself; you can’t be sure it’s a serial yet, so you need more information. More evidence.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave a hand. “More dead bodies. Jay’s already given me that speech. Doesn’t sound any better coming from you.”

“Sorry, not sorry. What else have you found?”

“Not much. Dug into the latest victim’s past. Other than a clear alcohol problem, no link yet. But I know there’s a link. There has to be.”

Amelia’s gaze feels a little heavy. She’s studying me and ending up on this side of the scrutiny is weird. “You don’t have to be the one who finds the link, Frankie. As long as it’s found. Right?” She takes another bite.

“Save the shrinking for the perps, Ames. Not me.” I did my time at the shrink after Dad’s death and then Mom’s suicide. Mandatory department sessions don’t count.

She tosses her red hair back, laughing in a way that fills her office, which looks nothing like a police precinct with its flowers, plants, diplomas, and photos. She’s done her best to make this grungy corner her own.

“You’re as interesting, if not more, than the perps you make me study. Your need for

justice combined with your trauma is a case study on its own. The only reason it's not one is because you're a cop, not a serial killer."

I roll my eyes and sigh. "Can we get back to the dick-decimating serial killer, please?"

Amelia's lips twitch. "Possible serial killer," she corrects with a gleam in her eyes. "And yes, but it doesn't sound like you have much to share."

"True," I admit. "But I was hoping you had some insight." I share my thoughts on the sexual assault angle.

"Possible, but you'd find some allegations in their past, right?"

"Nothing yet, I'm still digging."

"Keep at it. My door's always open. For digging into killers' minds or dinner and drinks. Like friends."

"How about tonight?" I could use a few hours of downtime.

"Perfect. Seven work?"

"I'll be here digging unless another body shows up."

"Let's hope it doesn't." She raises an eyebrow. "Do I have to wait until tonight to hear about you and Nate? I heard you gave him shit at the last crime scene."

I shrug. "Nothing is going on. We're over. I yelled at him because he took his sweet ass time getting to a rained-out crime scene."

The whole damn department, it seems, is invested in my relationship with Nate, which is hilarious since none of them bothered to tell me he was fucking every woman who batted her lashes in his direction.

I shove thoughts of Nate and our failed relationship away and spend the day digging deeper into the victims' lives.

So far, I've only learned that Kowalski, Donovan and Beaumont are all from Los Angeles or the surrounding area. They're locals, which means whoever they pissed off is likely to be a local too. I look into their early lives, trying to find a connection.

"I guess dinner has to wait?"

Amelia's voice startles me. "Is it seven o'clock already?" I ask. "How time flies when you're having fun."

"Funny," she says dryly.

I roll my eyes and finish my notes before closing my notebook and turn back to Amelia.

"Dinner won't wait. I'm too damn hungry." I stand and grab my bag. "How about Steak & Bake for dinner?"

"Steak and an enormous glass of red wine."

"And a tall, ice-cold beer." I look at her, daring her to scrunch her nose at my beer order. "Come on. Beat you there," I say.

We walk out together to our cars. We drive separately, so she won't have to bring me back here. Plus, the drive to the restaurant gives me time to think about the cases.

Nothing makes sense—yet—but I know it will. Later means more bodies, and that's not good.

The steakhouse is packed, but we snag a table and order drinks immediately. “Have you found anything yet?” Amelia's smile is beaming as she rests her chin in her hand, eyes sparkling with interest.

“I thought you wanted to talk about something other than the case?”

“Of course I do. You and Nate are over. Are you seeing anyone else, yet?”

“Nope.” I shake my head and grab my beer greedily, and take a big, unladylike gulp. “No energy for men or dating. Except for the occasional orgasm. And I can do that by myself.”

Amelia laughs. “Not pining after Nate?”

“Oh, hell no. He reminded me that I simply don't have time for a relationship, even with someone who works crazy hours. Men require too much attention, and my attention is always directed elsewhere.”

She nods. “On victims and their killers?”

“Right.” I smile as the server returns to take our orders. Steak and potatoes for me, a grilled shrimp salad for Amelia. “Justice for victims is a much worthier cause than a man-baby.”

Her gaze assesses me as if she can read my every thought, which is why I don't hang out with her as much as I would like to. “You know most people would agree with you.”

“Because I’m smart,” I snap back.

She laughs. “Yes, you are smart. And all relationships eventually fail. Until the one that doesn’t.” One auburn brow arches, daring me to disagree with her.

“Yeah, yeah.” I take another sip of beer. “I don’t see you jumping into a relationship.”

“Men are intimidated by me, and not just by my intelligence. My fascination with the dark side when I look like this,” she motions to her bright red hair and the band of freckles across her face. “It confuses them.”

“I call bullshit.” I point an accusing finger in her direction. “Who broke your heart or shook your faith in love?”

“Who didn’t?” she asks around a laugh, shaking her head. “Absent father, two cheating boyfriends, and one broken engagement. I’m working my way up to dating again. Slowly.”

I raise a brow. “But you’re giving me shit about it?”

“Damn right I am,” she grins. “You’re beautiful and lively, and there’s no reason you should be single. Nate is a fucking idiot.”

I laugh. “He’s a child punishing me for working too much, being too successful.” He’d resented my career success and how often I appeared in the news and press conferences. “I thought he’d get over it, but I was wrong.”

“Completely his loss.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to say that. He cheated and there’s no going back from

that. I'm fine. My break has more to do with me and my focus than with any residual heartbreak. I promise."

She takes a healthy sip of wine. "In that case, I have thoughts on your killer and his victims."

I smile and lean forward. "I'm all ears."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Damien

I slip through the unlocked sliding glass door into Francesca's house. The thrill of being inside her home sends a shiver down my spine.

Inside, the lingering scent of her perfume wraps around me like a lover's embrace. The hint of jasmine and sandalwood, an intoxicating elixir. I can get drunk on that scent alone.

But I'm here for more than that.

I prowls through her space, a predator scenting his prey. The living room is immaculate, everything in its proper place—just like the detective herself, always in control.

Exploring each room, I soak up every detail. I'll uncover all there is to know about Francesca DeMarco.

A few photos catch my eye. Frankie as a child, her big brown eyes full of innocence. She didn't know the horrors the world had in store for her yet. Beside it, a photo from her police academy graduation. There's a fire in her eyes now, a determination to take on the world's villains. But it doesn't faze her; she pushes through it, concentrating on the next case and the one that follows. The next criminal to catch.

I admire her ability to set her feelings aside, as if being emotional is some kind of

virtue. But not Francesca. She's unwavering, unshakable, regardless of the brutality or viciousness of the crime scene. She keeps that intense focus, the slightly bored expression that underlies her compulsion to make sure she gets justice for whatever asshole that's lucky enough to have her investigating their death.

All of this makes me think she's not as different from me as I initially thought, making her even more irresistible. A woman who shares my darkness? After decades of being a billionaire tech prodigy and the most sought-after bachelor, I never imagined such a creature existed.

Most of the women I go out with only see dollar signs when they look at me. Sure, some want to sleep with me just to say they've been with me, and others are hoping for an eighteen-year meal ticket, but none of them stick around because they aren't right.

Frankie, on the other hand? She may be right.

At least for right now.

Each room unlocks another side of her personality. Her kitchen—also tidy—shows a vibrant, joyful aura that catches me off guard. The fridge, stocked mostly with fruits, veggies, yogurt and a bread loaf, hints at her health-conscious efforts. Yet the soy sauce, ketchup and duck sauce packets neatly arranged in the egg tray tell me it's a constant battle against the convenience of takeout meals.

I mentally catalog her preferred coffee and milk brands, laundry detergent choice—even her favorite beer—nuggets to use later. Climbing the stairs, a devious grin spreads across my face as I near her bedroom, her innermost sanctum.

Her safe haven.

I touch the towels in her linen closet, note the brand of her shampoo, conditioner and body wash. Even the shaving gel she uses is ironed onto my memory. The scents she uses give me another glimpse into who she is, what she likes, the things she prioritizes in her life.

But it's the bedroom where the real treasure lies. Decorated in a deep, sensual purple. Her sheets are silky, cool and inviting. I want to lay her out on the bed, map every inch of her body with my hands and mouth until she's thrashing beneath me.

Focus, Damien. Business before pleasure.

Her closet reveals the duality of her nature, the split between her public and private lives. Work and play, neatly divided, just like the two sides warring within her soul. Even her shoe collection tells a story—sensible heels for chasing down criminals, strappy sandals for dancing the night away.

I drink in every detail, committing her sizes to memory with a satisfied smile. My first guesses were so close, just a hair off the mark.

The fabrics she chooses for her personal life are a delicious contrast to her professional armor. Silky, flowing, soft—a whisper of the woman beneath the tough exterior. “Oh, my sweet contradiction,” I say, trailing my fingers along an interesting dress.

On the surface, Francesca's hard edges and cold logic, a detective through and through. But I see the truth lurking inside, the shadows that mirror my own.

We're kindred spirits, Francesca and I, concealing our true natures behind meticulously crafted masks.

I move to her lingerie drawer, a treasure trove of silk and lace in every hue

imaginable. Red, purple, green—a rainbow of temptation. Sheer panties that leave little to the imagination, promising untold delights. This is definitely a side of her she keeps hidden, a femininity she reserves for one special man.

Me. It has to be me.

No one else could want her the way I do. Appreciate every facet of her beauty. She's mine, even if she doesn't know it yet. But I'll make sure she realizes it soon enough.

This little home invasion is about more than just getting to know Frankie. Her favorite color and how she takes her coffee are just the appetizers. I want the full fucking feast. I want to crack open her skull and suck out her secrets, the ones she keeps locked away tight. The ones that keep her up at night, staring at the ceiling, fingers twitching for her gun.

I set to my real task, placing the cameras I brought with meticulous care. The living room, the kitchen, the bathroom. And, of course, the bedroom. I need to watch every move she makes, hear every gasp and sigh. When she thinks she's alone and she lets that iron control slip just a little bit, I'll be watching.

I sync the cameras to my phone and test the feeds. Crystal clear, every angle covered. I allow myself a moment of satisfaction. My kitten thinks she's the hunter, but I'm always one step ahead. This is my game, and I'm very, very good at it.

I tweak the audio, cranking up the sensitivity until I can hear the whisper of her curtains and the hum of her fridge. I want it all. Every sigh, every gasp, every whispered curse. When she screams my name in the dark, I'll be listening.

There's nowhere to hide now, Francesca. Every inch of this place is mine, just like every inch of you will be. Your secrets, your fears, your filthy little fantasies. I'll peel them away, layer by layer, until you're laid bare before me.

The cameras are sleek, discreet, tucked away in the shadows. She'll never spot them, even with that keen eye. I've been playing this game for far too long and perfected my craft. When I'm satisfied that I've left no corner unwatched, I allow the tension to drain from my shoulders.

My pretty little mouse thinks she's safe in her maze of case files and red tape. She has no fucking idea that the big bad tomcat is already inside, claws out and ready to pounce.

This is my favorite part, the thrill of the chase. I could end it quickly, snap her pretty neck and be done with it. But where's the fun in that? Where's the slow, sweet seduction of fear?

Like Kowalski, Donovan and that smug prick Beaumont, I like to revel in my work and be a little creative. I could have killed each of them the first night I found them, but I didn't.

I saw them and followed them, learned their patterns of behavior. I knew what cologne they wore, who they fucked, and what secrets were on their hard drives. I knew it all because I had to.

And when I finally made my move, when I showed them the monster behind the mask, their screams were a fucking masterpiece.

Before I go, I leave her a little present. I select a delicate purple negligee from her drawer and lay it out on the bed like an offering to a goddess. And beside it, a real message.

A pair of sheer black stockings, more expensive and finer than anything she owns. A sign that someone's been here, touched her things. It will unsettle her cool composure and make her question her safety in her own home.

The first move in a game she doesn't yet know we're playing.

I take one last look around, imprinting the details in my mind. How the moonlight spills through the window and pools on the floor. The stack of case files on her nightstand, no doubt full of the horrors she carries home with her. The half-empty bottle of sleeping pills in the bathroom cabinet, her weakness.

I'll be back. But for now, I have my own preparations to make.

At home, I pour myself a scotch and settle in front of the monitors, watching. Waiting.

On the screens, Francesca's house glows with a ghostly blue light, silent and still. But not for long.

Close to midnight, her car pulls into the drive. I sit up straighter, adrenaline sparking through my veins.

It's showtime.

She enters the house, and I can tell she's exhausted. But still, ever the cop, she checks the locks and sweeps the room with a wary gaze. She frowns at the sliding door, annoyed at her own oversight.

I toggle through the feeds, tracking her progress. She sheds her jacket, toes off her shoes, and pours herself a generous glass of wine. I watch her throat work as she swallows, imagining the heat spreading through her chest.

She takes the glass with her as she climbs the stairs, her free hand rubbing the back of her neck. I could take all that stress from her if she'd let me. I could give her a release she's never known, never dared to crave.

The bathroom fills with steam as she starts the shower, and I lean forward, excitement running through me. I watch as she enters the bedroom and stops short at seeing my gift. I can read the confusion and unease in her body language, even through the camera lens. She reaches out, fingers tracing the lace and silk. She holds the stockings up, a frown marring that beautiful face.

Yes, Francesca. Put that clever mind to work. Realize you're not as safe as you thought, not even here.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Frankie

After dinner and drinks with Amelia, I should have gone straight home, but her words sparked a few ideas. Being the workaholic that I am, I wanted to explore them while they were still fresh in my mind.

I'm fucking exhausted after what feels like the longest day ever. I can barely keep my eyes open when I drag myself into the house. But that's what I get for returning to the office after saying our goodbyes in the restaurant's parking lot. Then I hightailed it to my messy desk to cross-check the victims' tax records to see if they'd ever lived outside California.

Even at the late hour and a few after-dinner drinks, I was wide awake enough to see if the poor guys had crossed paths somewhere out of state—airports, trains and buses. So far, I haven't found anything linking them together—not looks, careers, or even neighborhoods.

The men were all very different, and other than being homicide victims, the only thing they shared were alleged problems with alcohol. I could chalk this up to being circumstantial. Often, people resort to the bottle for a while over a job loss or the end of a relationship. It doesn't always mean a serious addiction to alcohol.

I'm not giving up, but after two beers and too many hours in front of a computer screen, I knew when I needed to shut it down in favor of a few hours of sleep.

The sick bastard will still be here tomorrow.

Right now, as I'm kicking off my shoes at the front door and hanging up my jacket, he's probably scouring Los Angeles somewhere, hunting for his next victim. Hunting for some poor soul—who I can't identify yet—who will become my problem in the morning.

A laugh escapes me, and I shake my head as I walk through the living room to do my nightly check of the windows and doors on the first floor.

"In the morning, if I'm lucky," I say to myself, thinking about the middle-of-the-night wake-up call to get to the Beaumont crime scene.

"Shit," I mutter when I realize I didn't lock the patio door. My shoulders slump, and I go through every room on the first floor to make sure there aren't any big bads lurking in dark corners.

Once every room is clear, I make my way upstairs and check the spare room that's never seen a guest, and then the bathroom. "All clear," I say to myself as I pull back the shower curtain and turn on the hot water. The damn thing takes forever to heat up—because I don't have time to find a good and dependable plumber—which means it needs a few minutes before it gets even close to hot.

Steam fills the bathroom as I head into my bedroom to undress and wash away the day. I barely take two steps inside when I sense something's wrong. Purple lingerie laid out on the bed catches my eye—lingerie I wore for Nate before I found out he was a cheating bastard. And I definitely didn't leave it out on the bed. Nor did I buy those stockings.

What the fuck?

My pulse quickens and I scan my room. Clenching my gun tighter, I check my closet, yanking the door open with my gun at the ready. Nothing. Nobody.

Knowing better than most that, sometimes, big bads do hide there, I peer under the bed. With my bedroom clear, I rush downstairs for a second, more thorough sweep of the house. My eyes are wide, and my heart is pounding so loud that if someone is inside, I might not hear them.

I race downstairs, checking every nook and cranny—the bathroom, my office, the kitchen, even the laundry room. I tell myself that the house is empty, but my pulse won't slow as I make a third circuit of all the rooms, just to make sure that I'm truly alone.

I return to my bedroom and head straight for the safe inside my closet. After a moment's hesitation, I decide to keep the weapon with me instead of securing it. Despite triple-checking the house and positively sure the house is empty, I can't shake the unsettling feeling in my gut.

Suddenly, a thought strikes me—Nate. He's the only person besides me who knows about that stupid negligee and the only one stupid and impulsive enough to break in and display it like this. The silk stockings are an unexpected, almost thoughtful addition. He's never been one for romance, and it seems out of character. Then again, he is trying to win me back.

My gaze sweeps the room again. What the hell is he thinking? Breaking into my house, leaving lingerie on my bed like some kind of twisted gift? My fingers tighten around the grip of my gun as a surge of anger floods through me. Nate's always been impulsive, but this crosses a line.

I stalk over to the bed and snatch up the negligee, the smooth fabric slipping through my fingers. I want to rip it to shreds, but I force myself to toss it back on the bed. It's

evidence now, as much as I hate to admit it. Evidence of Nate's unhealthy obsession, his refusal to let me go.

The stockings catch my eye again, and I scoff. Is this supposed to be romantic? A grand gesture to win back my affections? Nate's never been one for subtlety or genuine concern. This feels more like a taunt, a reminder of the hold he thinks he still has over me.

But I'm not falling for it. I'm not the same woman who fell for his charms and empty promises. I've grown. I've hardened. And I'll be damned if I let Nate manipulate me again.

Forget him, I tell myself as I storm into the bathroom. I strip down before stepping into the—finally—hot shower. My mind races as the water spray hits my skin, and I wonder how in the hell that negligee that's been in the back of the drawer for months ended up on my bed with a pair of stockings.

I shake my head vigorously, water droplets flying as I try to banish a scary thought. What if it isn't Nate? The possibility gnaws at me, but I refuse to entertain it. There's no way I inadvertently pulled out that negligee while rummaging for something else. I'm too careful for that kind of mistake.

I wouldn't. I couldn't have.

Although I should have thrown the damn thing in the trash months ago, practicality won out. It was expensive, and wasting money goes against my nature. Besides, it's almost brand new, and I can wear it whenever and for whomever I damn well please. It's my choice.

Am I losing my mind? Maybe it's sleep delirium, and I just really need a day or two off to recharge my batteries. That is a distinct possibility since I haven't had a day off

in the past three weeks because, in addition to a probably—very likely—serial killer, the city's been experiencing a crime wave. Dead bodies are popping up left, right and center. And even if it is just exhaustion, there are no days off in my future, not with the dick decapitator on the loose.

I tilt my head back, letting the water cascade over my face as if it could wash away the weariness and dark thoughts. I can't afford to fall apart, not when there's a deranged killer at large. I'll rest when this is over. If it's ever over.

I step from the shower and wrap a big fluffy towel around my body and use another to dry off my hair. My gaze falls on the open door to my bedroom. I see the negligee and stockings taunting me from the bed. Jaw clenched, I snatch them up and stuff them back into my drawer. Out of sight, out of mind. If only it were that simple.

Focus, Frankie. That's what my dad used to say to me when I'd go off on my teenage tangents about one injustice or another. "You've gotta learn to focus on the minor details, Frankie."

The minor details.

Not my stupid, cheating ex-boyfriend.

I train my mind on the details about the killer. And his victims.

There has to be a connection that I'm not seeing. I just know it. It's unlikely, given the wounds, that the victims are unrelated to one another. It's even less likely they are unknown to the killer.

Question number one. "How do they know each other?"

I work the moisturizer into my skin, starting with my arms and working my way

down to my legs. The repetitive motions are a small comfort. The thought of someone intruding into my space, rummaging through my things, especially my underwear drawer, still sends a shiver down my spine. But he's not here now.

And I'm dog fucking tired.

"Stop." I scold myself, forcing my scattered thoughts into a semblance of order. Nothing's going to make sense in this state of mind, and I need to be sharp. I need to sleep. Tomorrow's another day.

I pull on my shorts and tank and collapse onto the bed, the weight of the day pressing down on me. As I sink into the mattress, a heavy sigh escapes, tugging exhaustion from the deepest corners of my soul.

But before my eyes fully close, a flicker of movement catches my attention. My heart leaps, and I jolt upright, my hand automatically reaching for my gun on the nightstand. With every muscle tense, I scan the room, searching for any signs of intrusion.

The damn curtain. That's all it is. Moving from the evening breeze teasing my frayed nerves. I force myself to relax, my fingers loosening their grip on the gun.

"You need a break, Frankie," I tell myself. "Get some rest. Tomorrow's a new day."

But even as I try to convince myself, I know it's more than just fatigue clouding my judgment.

The serial killer is making me crazy.

CHAPTER NINE

Damien

My lips curve into a grin as I watch Francesca rush around her house with her gun drawn, treating her own home like a crime scene. She's in a frenzy after discovering the lingerie on her bed, moving from room to room in search of a criminal she'll never find.

A thrill shoots through me, igniting a warm, tingling sensation that spreads through my entire body.

Blood surges to my cock, making it rock hard, knowing her fear is all because of me.

It's me, kitten. I've invaded your sanctuary. Your fortress. Your home.

Watching her now is a stark contrast to her first sweep of the house when she moved more slowly, each step deliberate and cautious. But now? Now she's rushing around with a gun in hand, and it's hotter than ever. The panic in her brown eyes blends with the image of her as a strong, capable woman. Fearless and ready to fight.

Sexy as fuck.

Because of me.

"I'll keep you safe, baby girl. Always."

Something about her triggers the same protective instinct I typically reserve for only one person in this vast, indifferent world—Olivia, my sister, the only person who truly matters to me.

Until now.

With the house clean and the excitement fading, I prepare myself for the inevitable crash, but surprisingly, I'm treated to the sight of Francesca undressing in a tantalizing striptease, sending another rush of pleasure through me.

Beneath her professional attire of a floral blouse and navy suit lies a pale blue silk bra that cradles her luscious tits and panties that hug her shapely ass.

She keeps her physique with such dedication, feminine softness, and toned muscle, and it ignites an insistent ache in my cock. I let my imagination run wild to the moment I finally claim Francesca, peeling away each layer down to the lacy underthings she wears.

Each time I imagine having her, the fantasy unfolds differently.

Perhaps I'll tie her wrists and ankles, teasing her with feather-light touches until she's desperate for more. Or maybe I'll grip her throat tightly, thrusting into her with unrestrained ferocity as her eyes grow dark with fear. Her cries will be music to my ears as she begs for more, her pussy clenching around me in sync with her pleading whispers.

"Please, Damien," she'll cry out, her voice thick with need.

I open my eyes to watch her shed her panties and bra, revealing her curves for my eager eyes.

I free my cock, palming it for a moment. It's harder than it's ever been. Painful.

I watch as Francesca stands naked under the cascading water by the hidden camera that offers a panoramic view of her most intimate moments and stroke my cock with slow, deliberate motions. With her eyes closed, she allows the water to drench her hair, showcasing her perfect breasts that give way to a narrow waist and hips that flare out in the most alluring manner.

My mouth waters to mark up her skin, to mark her as mine.

I fantasize about sinking my teeth into the tender flesh of her inner thigh, the delicate underside of her breasts, the tantalizing strip of skin just above the swell of her ass. Each bite will prompt a moan of pleasure intertwined with the sweet sting of pain.

I'll smack her ass, leaving my handprints, a testament to my possession. Pinch and bite her nipples, initiating her into the exquisite world of pleasure-pain, where every nerve ending vibrates under my touch.

But above all, I want her to surrender. Her willing submission. I yearn for the moment she crawls to me, her eyes dark with desire, her voice trembling with need.

To beg for my cock.

To plead for the release only I can give her.

"Ah, fuck!" My cock's painfully engorged, yet I don't want to come.

Not yet.

My eyes close, and there she is in my most tantalizing fantasy, Francesca on her knees in the shower, the water cascading down her body like a waterfall. She looks

up at me, a slow, wicked smile playing on her lips.

“Give me your cock,” she purrs, reaching for me, but I pull back, a cruel tease.

“What do you say, kitten?” I taunt, my voice a low growl.

“Please,” she moans, her eyes locked onto mine, a desperate plea escaping. “Feed me your cock, please .” Her tongue darts out, tracing her bottom lip and then her top, a promise of the pleasure to come. Her eyes flutter shut as she moans, a sound so raw and needy I almost come undone.

“More,” she breathes, and I oblige, bringing the head of my cock to her lips, rubbing the slick pre-come back and forth, painting her mouth with my desire.

“Taste it,” I command, and she obeys, her lips parting to welcome me in, her tongue eagerly lapping at the evidence of my arousal. Her satisfied smile as she savors my cock is the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen, a glimpse of what could be.

I push her head down, feeding her my cock with a passion that borders on savagery. She’s ravenous, taking every inch of me until my balls are against her chin.

Her mouth is a sanctuary of sin, licking, sucking, making her eyes water as she gags on me. The sight of her smiling around my cock is a vision of debauchery that sends a surge of electricity to the base of my spine. “Francesca,” I grit out a warning.

Her response is a moan that vibrates along my shaft, her fingers digging into my ass cheeks, pulling me deeper, impossibly deeper. I’m powerless to resist. When I fist my hands in her hair, her dark waves wrapping around my fingers, she moans to the rhythm of her mouth on my cock.

“That’s it, nice and slow, kitten,” I coax, my voice a low rumble. Her tongue flattens,

cradling the underside of my cock, and she takes me deep, her top lip covering her teeth, ensuring a smooth, decadent glide down her throat.

“Fuck. Yes,” I growl, pumping into her mouth, reveling in the wet heat, the relentless suction. She takes me a little deeper, and that’s when the last thread of my control snaps. I explode, filling her mouth in my fantasy. “Suck it,” I command. My legs shake, and my spine tingles as I jerk my cock so hard and fast, I see stars.

After my heart rate slows and my vision clears, I open my eyes to find my hand and stomach covered in come. “Thanks, Francesca,” I whisper into the empty room. My gaze turns to the monitor, where she’s fast asleep. “That was good, kitten. A promise of the sweet chaos yet to come.”

I jump in the shower and get ready to head out into the warm Los Angeles night to satisfy a different need.

CHAPTER TEN

Frankie

“Hey, Frankie,” Jay begins with a smile that quickly fades as I storm into the office and slam my bag down on top of my desk. “You okay?”

I turn my gaze to my partner. “No, Jay. I am not fucking okay.” I’m seething.

After another night of shit sleep when I should have slept like a baby, I’m furious. I fell asleep easily, and it started out as a deep sleep, but even the dreams of me relaxing on a beach with a neon-colored cocktail in my hand and sand between my toes quickly turned into another fucking case. The case of the purple lingerie. “But I will be,” I growl and storm out of the office.

“Where are you going?” he calls out, his rubber-soled shoes squeak behind me on the linoleum.

“To take the trash out,” I call over my shoulder as I push through the glass doors of the precinct and make the short walk over to the forensics lab.

“Oh shit,” Jay mutters under his breath. “What did he do now?”

I breeze right by the receptionist, brushing off her questions because she doesn’t deserve my wrath. Oh no, that’s a special gift for one cheating son of a bitch who thinks he can still do whatever the hell he wants. My blood’s boiling, fists clenched so tight I can feel my nails digging into my palms.

“Nate,” I shout the moment I enter Nate’s haven, ignoring the loud boom of the door as it smacks against the wall. The entire lab goes silent, all eyes on me. Good. Let them see what happens when you cross Francesca DeMarco.

Nate looks up with a frown before he transforms it into a smile that makes his hazel eyes sparkle. That sparkle used to really get to me. It made me feel special even though it was a fucking lie. Now, it just makes me want to punch him.

“Frankie,” he says. “Good morning. What’s up?”

“What’s up?” I snort the question, derision heavy in my tone. I’m sure I’m creating a back draft as I sidestep the other tables and desks on my way to his desk. The click of my shoes on the linoleum floor echoes in the sudden silence.

“What’s up, Nate,” I hold up the stockings, dangling them in front of his face like a dead rat, “is that I don’t appreciate you breaking into my fucking house and leaving gifts.”

His frown returns, a crease forming between his brows. “I don’t know what you’re talking?—”

“Save it, Nate. I know it was you, and I’m telling you right now, don’t ever do that shit again. I promise you won’t like my response.”

My chest heaves. I’m a little intense right now, but a constant lack of sleep will do that to a girl—that and finding creepy-ass lingerie in your bedroom.

Nate launches out of his chair, and walks around his desk, color creeping up from his neck to his brows as he closes the distance between us. Finally, he invades my personal space, but I stand my ground, refusing to back down.

He says slowly and evenly, “It. Wasn’t. Me.”

I laugh, and the sound is harsh. “See, if you weren’t such a liar and a cheat, I might actually believe you. But I don’t.”

No one else knows about that stupid fucking nightie I wore it as my attempt to recapture his waning attention. The memory of it makes me want to puke. “Stay the hell away from my house and from me.”

He takes a step forward, pushing his face into mine, but I don’t back down, and I don’t flinch. I’ve stared down worse than him.

Once again, he says, “It. Wasn’t. Me.”

“I don’t believe you.” My voice is ice-cold, matching the fury in my eyes. “Try a stunt like that again, and I’ll make sure you never work in forensics in this city again. We clear?”

“Frankie,” Jay calls out, but I wave him off because this isn’t his fight. I appreciate his protective instinct, but I don’t need it.

“Frankie!” It’s Jay again, this time with a firm tone.

I keep my glare on Nate. “Stay away from me.”

“Frankie, we got a body.”

Nothing else could have pulled me from the white-hot rage coursing through me faster than those four words. I shoot one final glare at Nate to let him know not to fuck with me again and turn away, ignoring the stares of his forensics buddies as I join Jay at the door. “Where?”

Jay's lips tug into a lopsided grin. "Let's get to the car first, killer."

I snort-laugh and a smile crosses my face as we hurry out to the parking lot. I inhale the warm morning air and exhale deeply until my heart rate is back to normal and turn my focus back to the case.

"I'm fine," I assure Jay, both of us jogging the last few feet to the car. "What details do you have?" I ask as I wrestle in my purse for the keys.

"Not much to go on. Body dumped behind a halfway house on Cloverdale. Manager found it while taking out the trash." Jay swipes the keys from my hand without missing a beat, leaving me no choice but to claim shotgun.

We don't hit too much traffic and Jay gets us to the scene in double-time. As we pull up to the address, I take in the massive sign on the front lawn.

"Sober living," I mutter, the gears in my head already turning. "Two of our three vics had a history of booze issues. Could be the connection we've been looking for."

Jay shrugs as we make our way down the narrow path between buildings, nodding at the officers who beat us to the scene. "Maybe," he says, "or it could just be a convenient spot to ditch a body."

Jay's right, and maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, but as we step into the alley with its golden glow and the stink of hot, old garbage, I just know it's not. The killer picked this alley for a reason. I'm sure of it.

Right beside the large blue dumpsters, a pair of blue and white sneakers peek out as the first sign of our victim. "Sneakers look new. About a size ten, eleven, so it's safe to say not a robbery."

“Frankie,” he sighs, but I hold up a hand, asking for silence while I examine the body and the surrounding area.

The victim’s chest is bare, his white chef’s coat unbuttoned and hanging open. His black and white houndstooth pants are pulled down around his ankles.

I squat down to get a closer look. “He’s been worked over good. Tortured. More than the last three vics combined. Surprisingly, he still has his dick.”

Jay mirrors my position on the other side of the body, his eyes roving over the victim’s legs, taking in the angry red gashes and purple bruises that mar the skin. He lets out a low whistle as his gaze travels up to the man’s stomach. “Fuck, Frankie. His organs are shredded.”

I nod, my eyes tracing the jagged wounds that crisscross the victim’s torso. “More like eviscerated.” It’s not a clean cut, not by a long shot. The edges are ragged, like someone went at him with a serrated knife. Or claws. Shreds of the intestine and God knows what else spill out onto the dirty concrete, glistening in the morning light. “Whatever connects this poor dude to the others, it earned him a special kind of hate.”

Leaning in closer, I study the man’s face. His features are distorted, and his mouth frozen open. “Bag went on while he was still breathing,” I say, my stomach churning at the thought.

Jay grunts in agreement. “No reason to bother otherwise. Our whack job doesn’t get off on torturing dead bodies.”

“What the fuck did you do?” I whisper to the DB because this kind of hatred is personal. Very fucking personal. “We know who he is?”

The cop standing watch over the body confirms, extending a plastic evidence pouch. “We found his wallet on him. Back pants pocket.”

I grab the bag with my gloved fingers, opening it and grabbing the billfold. “Tristan Dupont. Why does that name ring a bell?”

“Hot up-and-coming chef. He runs that new place in Malibu, Under the Sea.”

I blink in surprise. “How the hell do you know that?”

“What?” Jay asks with a shrug. “I know stuff.”

I snicker at Jay’s expression. “Sure, you know ‘80s football trivia and ‘90s Lakers rosters. But anything from this century? Not so much.”

Jay’s face breaks into an exaggerated grin that has me chuckling. “Well, if you weren’t such a hermit, you’d be up to speed on the city’s trendiest eateries like yours truly.”

“Okay, Mr. Know-It-All. We’ve got a hot Malibu chef. But what’s he doing in this neck of the woods?” I ask. “The restaurant’s nowhere near here, and his Manhattan Beach address puts him even further from this spot.”

Officer Padilla chimes in, “Looks like he was heading home from his shift. We found this bag near the body. I snapped some pictures before sealing it up as evidence.”

Jay and I stare at each other. “Good job, Padilla.” Jay digs into the evidence bag containing a deep blue duffel bag. “Anything good in there?”

Padilla says, “His knife roll, an extra coat, toiletries and his cell phone.”

Jay lets out a heavy sigh. “It’s his work bag. Knives are clean and the change of clothes is fresh.”

I glance at Jay. “Let’s get that phone to the lab. There might be something useful on it—texts, calls, location data.”

Jay nods, already slipping the phone into a different evidence bag. “Make sure they prioritize it.”

“You got it.” Padilla takes the phone and the bag over to the forensics team, where Nate accepts it with a nod.

“Hopefully, this leads us somewhere,” I say, shifting my focus back to the crime scene. There’s still plenty of ground to cover.

Behind the forensics team, I spot Amelia rushing forward, only to be stopped by a uniform at the yellow tape. “Frankie!”

“Let her through,” I call out, waving her over. “What’s the big emergency?”

“No emergency.” She’s breathing heavily as if she ran a mile rather than a few short feet before flashing a toothy grin. “I finished the preliminary profile of your killer, and I heard there was a new body, so you know I couldn’t resist.”

“The head shrinker needs a shrink,” I snark under my breath.

“So, you’re not interested?” The playful smile on her face is annoying.

I nod. “Yes, I’m interested. Duh!”

“Okay, so I’ve noted what the officers on the scene told me, but it doesn’t change

anything,” she begins, choosing her words carefully. “And remember, this is tentative, but pretty damn accurate. You’re dealing with a highly intelligent, organized killer. OCD-level meticulous, as if he’s thought of everything, ran through the steps repeatedly. Nothing he does is by accident.”

I nod, stepping away from the body in case she wants a look-see at the gory details. She doesn’t, and I don’t blame her. “So,” I say, “the change in M.O., the increase in the torture,” I point my thumb over my shoulder to the dead chef behind us. “It’s all part of his sick game?” I ask.

“Exactly. Killing is his goal. Torture is a bonus. But everything else? It’s just a game to him.”

“What kind of job could this guy have? Highly intelligent and with enough time for an elaborate kill and an elaborate dump site?” This guy is an enigma and with Amelia’s profile, it has me wondering if this killer is beyond my skill set. Maybe I’m still too tired to focus correctly, or maybe he’s just better than me.

“Don’t look like that,” Amelia chides. “This is how serial killers act. They make you doubt yourself and your skills. It’s a defense mechanism, Frankie. Don’t succumb to it. If you do, he wins.”

A laugh escapes. “Jesus Christ, Amelia...he’s already winning.” I gesture to the body, surrounded by the forensics team. “Another notch in his belt.”

“Hence the serial in serial killer. This guy was as good as dead before you even found the last body, Frankie. The perp probably has a list, and all you can do is put the pieces together before he gets to the end. Or worse.”

I frown. “What could be worse than a dozen dead bodies?”

She shrugs. “A confident serial killer who leaves your jurisdiction. Another detective will have to start from scratch while this guy’s kill number keeps going up.”

Shit. “Thanks, Amelia. That’s all I needed to hear.” This guy is already getting in my head, and I can’t let that happen. That’s how we make mistakes.

Amelia nods and gives me a rueful smile. “Anytime. I’m going to head back to the lab, see if I can dig up anything else on our mystery man. Keep me posted?”

“You got it.” I watch her walk away before turning to Padilla. “Fill in Dr. Novak on what we’ve got so far but keep her away from the body. Don’t need her getting all hot and bothered over this sick bastard’s handiwork.”

Officer Padilla nods, puffing out his chest as he leads Amelia aside, no doubt eager to impress the pretty psychologist with his wealth of gory details. I turn my attention back to the crime scene.

This son of a bitch may be smart, and he may have a head start, but I’ll be damned if I let him win. I’m going to hunt him down and make him pay for every life he’s taken.

Jay steps beside me. “The forensics have it all in hand now. Wanna grab a cup of coffee?”

“Always,” I nod. “But in this neighborhood, a gas station is as good as it gets.” I shudder at the thought, because that shit is just as bad as the precinct coffee.

“Such a coffee snob,” he jokes. “Come on. I spotted some food trucks close by, and I bet they have good coffee. And food.”

I turn and follow him back to the car. “Who are you, and what have you done with my grouchy ass partner?”

“You mean your wiser yet supremely hip partner?” Jay wiggles his brows and starts the car as we head off toward some coffee truck he insists he knows about, but I don’t. Right as I’m fastening my seatbelt, he switches to big brother mode, ready to give me some advice. I roll my eyes but settle in for the lecture, too tired to push back against his patronizing shit.

“Listen, Frankie, I know I’m not your father, and I wouldn’t dare try to replace him, but you know you can always talk to me.”

“I know,” I sigh and tell myself to get over myself. Jay’s been like a father to me since I was a young girl. Jay and my dad were partners, so he’s always been Uncle Jay to me, but two weeks after my fifteenth birthday, he became more than just an uncle.

He was the only father-figure I had after the men he and my father were investigating broke into our home in the middle of the night. My dad protected me and my mom, fighting off the intruders and putting a bullet in one of them. After a nasty fistfight, though, they overpowered him and shot him before Jay could get there. Jay arrived like a hero, killing two of them before rushing my dad to the hospital, where he died a few minutes later.

So, Jay’s a father to me in all the ways that matter, and if I can tell anyone what’s bothering me, it’s Jay. But that doesn’t make it easy to put the thoughts into words. I sigh heavily and look at Jay. He’s older now, his hair more gray than not at this point, but he’s still the best damn cop I know.

“You gonna make me pull it out of you, or do I have to guess?”

I smile, my resistance to his probing my personal life gone like the wind. “You’re getting impatient in your old age, Jay.”

He grins, pulling up to an empty parking space in front of the food trucks. I hit the first truck selling coffee and pastries and luck out because one sip and I'm in heaven. Jay is finally learning how to pick a decent cup of coffee.

While I'm digging into my pastry, though, he catches me off guard. "And you're dodging the question," he says. "Are you worried about the Police Union's Ball because you don't have a date?"

I glare at him. Hard.

He laughs.

"I wasn't even thinking about that stupid ball, but now I have another thing to worry about, so thanks for that."

"Anytime. Tell me what's on your mind."

I sip the dark coffee, opting for a double espresso over my usual Americano. "What if this guy is just better than me, Jay? What if I do my absolute fucking best to find him, and I still don't?"

That's my biggest fear and it's growing by the minute, my mind off the amazing coffee and Police Ball dates now and back to the case. "Each new body presents fresh evidence, but we still don't have a connection between the cases and not one fucking piece of forensic evidence to help find this bastard."

"Frankie," Jay sighs, and I prepare myself for the rest of his fatherly talks which are lectures and life lessons in equal parts. I've had many of them over the years, and sometimes they inspire me, and other times they piss me off.

"This guy, this killer? He's a fucking human. He's not a monster, but a man."

“Lots of men are monsters,” I remind him sarcastically.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. A lot of men do monstrous things but at the end of the day they are just men. Sad, angry little men. When you start thinking of them as some kind of supernatural shit, that’s when they win.”

“He’s smart,” I shoot back.

“You’re smart too and you have a natural ability to read people that’s only gotten better as you’ve gotten older. He might have a few more IQ points than any of us, but that doesn’t make him smarter . Plenty of smart people have been caught by dumbass cops, Frankie.”

I smile. “That’s true.”

“Solid detective work beats luck every fucking time. Sure, he’s smart and dangerous. But he’s also a cocky bastard. Guys that don’t get caught? They hide the bodies so we can’t find them. They don’t put on a goddamn show. This guy can be caught, which means we’ll catch him. That you’ll catch him. I’ll be there to witness it.”

I nod and take another sip of espresso and then another. Jay is right about one thing, this guy is man, a living, breathing man with blood pumping through his veins. Not a monster. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am,” he replies with confidence. “And you know, if you’re looking for a date to the ball, Cassandra has a son. He’s an accountant.” Before I can reply, Jay lets out a loud bark of laughter that echoes in the night air.

“I’m not double dating with you, Jay.”

“You don’t date at all,” he shoots back.

“True, so why start with a ballroom full of cops?”

I don't even want to attend the damn ball. There's no way I'll subject a new date to that torture. I can't save myself, but I can certainly save someone else. “I'll be there with a fake smile on my face. Blessedly alone.”

“Probably not,” he shoots back. “I'm sure Nate will be there. I hear he looks good in a suit.”

Jay laughs when I flip him the bird. “Just for that, dinner is on you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damien

“Insiders report that we are now dealing with an active serial killer, but authorities have not yet verified if the recent homicide is connected to the previous two.”

I can barely hear the female voice as I walk through the heavy wooden doors of Serenity House.

This place is the mental health hospital for the rich and famous in the southwest. It’s not uncommon to find famous movie stars and musicians, politicians and powerful executives roaming the halls to visit loved ones.

Every inch of Serenity House looks like it’s a rehab facility straight off a Hollywood set, done in blond pine and shades of green and blue. It is as serene as its name, and the sound of the ocean waves crashing in the distance offers a constant feeling of tranquility.

At least that’s the hope and why we all shell out a five-figure fee each month.

“How is she today?” The check-in desk is an imposing monstrosity, so at odds with the rest of the campus.

The day nurse, Tara, quickly turns the volume on her computer down where the news was playing and greets me with a warm smile. “Good afternoon, Mr. Wolfe. Olivia’s having a good day. She had breakfast with some friends and even made it to art

class.” I hate how they always sound so cheerful when they talk about my sister’s condition, like she’s actually living her life. We all know she’s hand fed pureed food because she can’t do it herself. And art class? She just sits there, doing nothing. I know they mean well, and the words are meant to encourage, but all they do is piss me off. Olivia is a bright and beautiful woman, at least she’s supposed to be. And she would be. If not for them. “Thanks. Where is she?”

Tara’s smile falls just a little, which is no surprise. “In her room.”

Exactly. For all the upbeat status reports and signs of encouragement, Olivia is still as withdrawn today as she was almost sixteen years ago when she arrived. She’s still in a state of catatonia that makes it impossible to gauge whether any of the treatments are working. She’s not responding to any kind of stimuli, not walking and not even fucking smiling.

“Thanks.” I know the path to Olivia’s room as well as I know my way around my office or any of my homes. She’s been living here longer than she’s lived anywhere else since before our parents died. This is her home.

I stop outside the door of her private room, neatly decorated in a blend of modern thirty-year-old woman and mentally stunted teenage girl. She sits by the window in her wheelchair, staring out at the green courtyard. Silently. Always so fucking silent.

It’s been so many years—fifteen years, nine months, three weeks, and four days to be exact—since I’ve heard her voice, I’m not sure I’d recognize it. But I’ll always remember the very last thing she said to me before she stopped speaking. I’ll never forget. My hands bunch into fists, but I force them to relax. Anger isn’t what Olivia needs to see.

“Hey, Olivia.”

She tenses at the sound of my voice, and that's the only sign that she hears me. Olivia doesn't turn, smile, or acknowledge me in any way.

"Can I come in?"

She says nothing, as usual, and I step inside.

I look around and notice a few new sketches hanging on the wall. One is of Olivia and the other is a charcoal sketch of a man. "Is that me?"

She says nothing, but I swear there's a flash of something in her eyes as if she's trying to answer. She doesn't move, but her closest friend, if that's what you can call Chelsie, is a chronically depressed artist who fills my sister's room with art.

That one small act makes me feel better about everything, so I appreciate Chelsie for that. I know I'm on the right path—not that I ever had any doubt—but those glimpses of the woman Olivia was meant to be push me forward.

"It's really good. But I think I'm more handsome in person. Don't you?"

Her big blue eyes stare at me, assessing me, but she never utters a word.

I often wonder if she can hear me at all or if I'm just talking to myself. It doesn't matter because I'll never stop. I'll never stop visiting her. Avenging her.

"It's really good," I say, pointing to the sketch. "I can almost feel the texture of your hair," I tell her honestly. "Your eyes are sadder here than when I look at you." I wonder if Chelsie sees something in my sister that I can't because this sketch reminds me of the old Olivia.

I wish she could talk. I wish she could tell me what she's thinking, what's happening

inside her head. I'd give anything to hear her speak again, to get on my nerves like every other big sister on the planet. To give me shit about my lack of a love life or my long hours at the office.

Soon , I promise myself.

“Want to go for a walk around the grounds? It's warm and sunny, and you could use some color.”

She sits in her wheelchair, staring at me with no display of emotion, just waiting—presumably—for me to start our walk.

I push her through the winding paths that weave through the property, passing sculpted bushes, vibrant flowers and tropical plants as we weave through the beautiful campus. I talk while Olivia listens. Or at least I think she's listening.

“I met a woman,” I say, then quickly add, “but don't worry. I'll still be your biggest fan. I'll still come see you and make sure you have the best care.”

I don't know if she can hear me, but I keep talking. “She's beautiful, with thick, wavy brown hair and big brown eyes. She's strong and tough, a real badass.” I smile, thinking about Frankie. “She's not impressed with my money or my good looks.”

The ocean comes into view, and I take a long breath, taking in its beauty. I bring the wheelchair to stop at a vista point so my sister can enjoy the view.

“I've got some more good news.” I kneel and look into her eyes. “Do you recall the tech firm I launched years back? Well, it's thriving.” I slide a stray strand of hair from her face, longing for her reply.

“I've teamed up with a top-tier neuroscientist, the best there is, and together, we've

created an advanced brain training program designed specifically for you.”

I hold her hand tightly, wishing my words could get through to her. “This is truly state-of-the-art, sis.”

I lean in closer. “Olivia, I honestly believe this could solve our problem. Isn’t that exciting?”

I started out as a nerdy app developer, but then had massive success when two of my apps created a storm in Silicon Valley and my business and reputation flourished. It marked the beginning of a very lucrative tech career, enabling me to shape a public persona while keeping my private life—and Olivia’s—well-protected. Now, I hold the last piece of the puzzle, I hope, resulting from years of dedication.

I long to see the light return to Olivia’s eyes, to ask her something and hear her reply. “This strategy uses AI and machine learning to map your neural pathways. It will help us pinpoint what you need for recovery. I’m really excited about this.”

Olivia stares at the water, and I cover my frustration with a smile and grab her hand. “It’s a lot to understand, but I think we’re getting close to perfecting it. I know it’s going to help Olivia.” Thanks to my meeting with Justin Storm, I’m closer than ever to making my dream a reality. “What’s the first thing you’ll do?”

Her expression stays blank.

Nothing.

“I’ll bet you want to go shopping. Maybe go somewhere nice for dinner?” I laugh again. “Maybe a vacation somewhere exotic?” I grip her hand tighter, willing her to give me something. Anything.

But I get nothing.

It's not her fault, and I don't direct any of my anger toward her. None of it. But I'm angry as fuck. I grip her hand tighter, and she doesn't pull away, doesn't gasp in shock, or cry out in pain.

I release her hand, and I unlock the brakes on her chair, forcing myself to calm down before I start to push her back to her room again. That blank stare that permeates her blue eyes, the same shade as our mom's, is the one thing I can't forgive. She's alive and breathing, but she's not living. Her eyes are devoid of life, stolen from her. Taken without permission.

Nothing will ever make that right.

But I take small measures to make it so I can live a little easier with it. "We'll be ready to start the first test next month. Isn't that exciting?" I stop and lean down in front of Olivia, desperate to see a hint of something in her eyes. "Don't you want to be able to communicate?"

Her gaze meets mine, but it's as blank as ever. In fact, it's so blank that I wonder if the psychological damage she suffered is so deep and so profound that I've been fooling myself about her chances of improving.

"I wish I could tell you more, Olivia." I look away, fix my gaze on the vast ocean as it sparkles under the blazing sun. I could tell her what I've been up to, tell her about all the ways I'm avenging her trauma since it's clear she can't hear me and won't respond.

I can, yet I don't.

That's just for me, even though every strike of my blade, every moment of torture I

inflict, is ultimately for her. Just because I enjoy the terror I instill in my victims doesn't mean I don't give it purpose. I do.

Olivia is my purpose.

Even with all of that, all these years of research and development, tens of millions of dollars in equipment, experts, patents and the rest. All of it is to bring my sister, my only family, back to me.

And it might all be for nothing.

"No," I say to myself. It's not for nothing. I'll never stop trying. Not fucking ever. I turn back to Olivia. She's staring at me now, and I know it's my mind seeing a question in her eyes when there is none there.

"Do you want more art supplies for Chelsie? It looks like you're becoming quite the art collector." There's nothing I won't do for her, nothing at all.

Even kill.

My shoulders relax as I think about Tristan Dupont and the pain he felt as life faded from his eyes and the blood drained from his body. That makes me feel a little better.

This new brain-computer interface is going to be a game changer for Olivia and so many like her around the world. It's going to take the tech industry by storm, and when it does, my name, Damien Wolfe, will be the one attached to it.

The world will recognize that I'm the one who invented this innovation. They'll applaud me, laud my achievements, and maybe even shower me with humanitarian awards.

Yet through it all, they'll remain oblivious to my true self and the genuine cost of my success.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Damien

I sit in my dimly lit living room in front of my monitor displaying my favorite subject, Detective Francesca DeMarco. Fresh from her shower, she captivates me, moving around her room, blissfully unaware of my watchful gaze.

I can't tear my eyes away; her skin rosy pink from the hot water, and her hair hidden beneath a shower cap.

My mouth waters as I imagine her nipples—just a shade lighter than ripe strawberries—between my lips. How they'll feel hard in my mouth, how sweet and satisfying they'll taste. The thought makes my cock hard.

She hangs her cap on its hook, and my gaze lingers on her slender waist, the lacy panties she just slipped into accentuating her hourglass figure. It's a huge contrast to the conservative suits she wears while chasing killers like me. But not this time.

This time, I'm the one watching her, savoring every detail she usually hides from the world. I wonder what fantasies dance in her mind, what secrets she guards beneath that tough exterior. I crave to uncover them all, especially the ones she keeps hidden even from herself.

The lace hugs her hips, teasing me with glimpses of her plump, round ass cheeks when she bends over to retrieve the matching bra.

This is no ordinary undergarment. No, it seems special. A small smile tugs at my lips as I lean forward, completely entranced.

“What’s on your agenda for tonight, Francesca? Got a date lined up?” And more importantly, who’s the lucky guy? Do I have a rival? The idea should make me hesitate, but I grin, considering all the ways I can end the competition if necessary.

Her phone rings, and my heart rate picks up. Is this the mystery man who gets to spend the evening with her? I make a mental note to clone her phone so I can listen in on her conversations and learn more about her. The ringing stops.

“Shit,” she mutters as she settles one thigh-high stocking in place before reaching for her phone. “Jay?”

She slides the other stocking up her toned leg while he speaks, nodding as if he can see her. “Yeah, I’ll be ready by six o’clock. That’s an hour from now,” she replies with a scoff. “How long do you think it’ll take to put on a dress and do my makeup?”

Whatever Jay says makes her laugh and it’s loud and full of life, echoing against her bedroom walls.

“I’ll be ready at six, smartass.”

I check the time on my screen and see it’s five. In sixty minutes, her partner will arrive to take her somewhere, and I’m dying to find out where.

Her hair, swept up in an old Hollywood glamor style, makes my fingers twitch. I can almost feel the strands slipping through my hands, tangling and loosening as I wreck that perfect updo while I push my hard cock into her.

Her makeup, more extravagant than usual, catches my attention next. Dark eyeliner,

bold shadow, those full, blood-red lips. For a fleeting moment, doubt creeps in. Are she and Jay more than just colleagues? The thought sends a surge of possessive rage through me. I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms until the pain clears my mind.

Francesca steps into a floor-length red gown. It hugs every curve, igniting every twisted thought in my mind. I'm instantly hard. And endlessly curious. My imagination runs wild with possibilities. What event could warrant such a dress? I need to know. I need to be there.

Without hesitation, I head to my bedroom and pull on my best black-tie attire. Wherever she's going, I'll find my way in. I'm Damien Wolfe. This city bends to my will.

And Francesca's salary is conveniently funded by my tax dollars.

Kind of ironic, don't you think?

I sit in the car outside down the street from her home and watch Jay's classic muscle car pull up. She must've been peering through the blinds waiting for him because she's outside, locking up and dashing to the curb before he can do the gentlemanly thing and open the passenger door for her.

Once she settles herself in the car, they share a laugh as she pulls down the seatbelt and straps herself in before Jay drives away from the curb. I trail them, just one car behind, my heart racing as they pull into the convention center.

The parking lot is full of patrol vehicles and black SUVs with government plates mixed in with high-end luxury cars. Aha, I realize. It must be a charity event. Perfect.

I drive past the parking lot and head to my penthouse for a more fitting ride.

Something that will turn heads. Something worthy of the occasion.

Tonight is the night, kitten.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Frankie

When Jay and I first step into the ballroom, I feel out of place in this elegant red dress. It's gorgeous and didn't break the bank, which makes it even more beautiful. It's not me, then again, it's not like there's a huge call for me to wear an evening gown to a crime scene, so maybe it is me.

With that thought in mind, I straighten my posture and decide to embrace the look. It's not every day I get to feel this glamorous and showcase my feminine side, so even though the Police Union Ball is the last place I want to be tonight, I'm going to have fun and enjoy feeling beautiful.

I take my time at the entrance of the ballroom to scan the crowd, a mix of police officers and detectives mingling with the brass, local and state politicians, wealthy individuals, and even a few celebrities who proudly support law enforcement.

There are coworkers I know in their best but ill-fitting suits, their wives and fellow female officers in beautiful gowns, smiling and chatting with donors. No police event is complete without affluent badge bunnies with deep pockets.

I just have to get through a few hours before I can leave without catching shit from my captain tomorrow. I take a deep breath and take several steps forward, exhaling as I spot a waiter with a tray of champagne flutes.

"Thank you," I say as I accept a flute from the disinterested server and drink it down.

The place is crowded, and as soon as I spot another server, I grab another champagne flute, but I take my time enjoying this one.

A loud wolf whistle sounds behind me, and I roll my eyes. “Wow, you clean up nice.” The sound of Amelia’s voice puts me at ease, and I turn to see her wearing a big smile that’s nearly as sparkly as her gold dress.

“I could say the same to you, Ames. Are you looking to bag a rich benefactor?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’ll settle for gorgeous and hung with excellent communication skills and a high emotional quotient.” Her laughter draws a few looks, but she’s oblivious. “Love the dress.”

“Thanks,” I say, twirling to show off the slinky silhouette. “It was beautiful and on sale, two things I look for when it comes to impractical clothing choices.”

Amelia leans in with a conspiratorial smile. “Well, it’s certainly working based on the way all the men are checking you out. Almost makes me wish I hadn’t spent so much time getting dolled up.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, please. You’re always dressed up and looking fantastic. You know it.”

She gives me a satisfied smile. “It’s nice to hear, anyway.” Amelia lets out a sigh and stands beside me to look over the crowd. “There are some good-looking guys in here tonight,” she whispers.

“And many of them are law enforcement, so be careful.”

“Because you’re calling dibs? Or some other reason?” Her brows arch, and she leans in, hungry for all the gossip.

“Because shitting where you eat can make things complicated. Trust me.” I think of Nate and that damn lingerie. Again.

“Noted. But maybe I’m looking for tonight and not forever.” She wiggles her auburn brows, laughing and drawing stares.

“In that case, have at it,” I tell her just as my gaze lands on a good-looking man who can’t seem to keep his eyes off me. But a deeper look reveals he’s not just totally fucking gorgeous—he’s also familiar. I search my memory for recent faces and smile because he’s the rich prick from Beans & Things.

“Whoa,” Amelia sighs. “How do you know him?”

Something about Amelia’s tone draws my attention back to her. “Do you know him?” It would be just my luck that this handsome man is one of her former conquests.

Amelia’s eyes go wide. “You don’t know Damien Wolfe?”

I frown. “I know the name, sure. Some rich tech guy who’s going to change the world or something. Right? But that guy over there spilled coffee on me a few days ago.” I know the name because he’s always in the news. But unless it helps me solve a murder, I don’t bother myself with celebrity news and gossip. “Didn’t know they grew tech nerds so hot, though.”

“Well, he can’t take his eyes off you, and he’s coming this way, so shoot your shot, Frankie.”

I hear her words and feel it when she bumps my shoulder with hers. Giddiness radiating from her body. But I can’t take my eyes off the tech nerd, Damien Wolfe, as he quickly approaches me.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he says when he reaches us, his voice low and deep, hitting all the right pleasure centers.

“Too fancy to let you spill more coffee on me,” I reply with a smile.

His smile gets bigger, and at that moment, I realize I may have judged him too harshly at our first meeting. A man who can laugh at himself is a rare breed.

“I am truly sorry about that.” He holds out a hand. “Damien Wolfe. Supporter of law enforcement.”

I smile and extend my hand. “Francesca DeMarco, law enforcement. And this is my friend, Dr. Amelia Novak.”

He shakes my hand, and a jolt of electricity courses between us, so intense I have to steady myself to keep from pulling away. Then he turns to Amelia, nodding warmly as he shakes her hand. “The pleasure is mine,” he says, before his gaze returns to me.

“I’ll just slip out,” Amelia says with a playful grin, pretending to be the awkward third wheel.

“Nice meeting you, Amelia,” Damien replies, and I silently credit his mother for raising him with good manners.

“Go for it,” Amelia mouths behind him before she spins and takes off toward a group of tuxedos.

I turn another smile to Damien, who still looks at me as if I’m on tonight’s menu. “So, a supporter of law enforcement?”

He nods slowly. “I am, yes. In fact, I saw you on the news a few days ago at a crime

scene, and I'm curious..." The words come slowly, and I brace myself.

Most men are either dismissive of my career or entirely too interested. I have an ugly feeling that Mr. Wolfe is the latter, which makes him just too damn good to be true.

"Curious about what?" I hold my breath and run through my list of ready answers to morbid questions.

Damien leans in, and I can see that his hazel eyes aren't a blend of colors so much as several rings that gently blend to create a brilliant shade of golden brown.

"How do you process it all? I mean, all the violence and trauma, the sadness and the grieving families, it must be difficult."

His question surprises me, and I realize that, yet again, I have misjudged him. I shrug off his curious look with a friendly smile.

"It's part of the job. Some days, I process it with humor. Other days I cry for the senseless loss of life. Mostly, I just do my damndest to get justice for the victims."

His smile grows brighter and more captivating with each passing second. I'm momentarily surprised by it, but it's his strikingly good looks that leave me completely distracted. "Francesca," he begins in a voice dripping with honey.

"Frankie," I quickly correct him. "Call me Frankie." What is it about this man that's affecting me? Usually, I'm an ice queen when it comes to men, but right now, I feel like a giant puddle of goo.

"Frankie," he practically growls. "Have dinner with me." It's more of a command than a request, and instead of being put off, I'm intrigued. Hell, I'm hungry for him.

“Dinner.” I let the word linger between us. Our eyes lock in an intense staring contest that’s making me too warm. I think about it for a long moment, weighing my options. What would I have to talk about with a gorgeous, globe-trotting billionaire? In a word, nothing. Then again, maybe I should adopt Amelia’s mindset. Damien doesn’t have to be Mr. Right. He could simply be Mr. Right Now. “Dinner. Huh?”

He nods, his smile twisting into a lopsided grin. “Yes, dinner.”

I have to be honest. His voice alone is having an aphrodisiac effect on me. “Dinner sounds nice.” I fish a business card from the tiny, useless box that passes for my purse this evening and press it into his palm. “Call or text me, and we’ll figure out an evening that fits both of our schedules.”

He holds the card between his index and middle fingers before tucking it into his jacket pocket. “Talk to you soon, Frankie. Very soon.”

My breath catches in my throat as I watch him walk away. He’s a big man, tall and broad with long legs. And I’ll bet good money that the tuxedo isn’t just his but made to fit his body perfectly.

My fingers twitch with the desire to touch his body over that tuxedo to see if it’s as hard as it looks. I bet it is. I grab another drink and go find my coworkers to waste some time with before I can make up an excuse to go home.

“You clean up nice, DeMarco.”

I roll my eyes at the narcotics detective who can’t take his eyes off my cleavage. “Thanks. Wish I could say the same for you.”

He laughs. “Seriously, you look incredible in that dress.”

“Thank you. I heard there’s an heiress here who wants to know all about going undercover.”

His eyes light up. “Seriously? Don’t fuck with me, Frankie.”

I smile. “Blonde and busty in a long silver dress with a slit. Go get her.”

He takes off and I relax, knowing I won’t have to deal with his drunken antics an hour from now.

“That was a nice thing you did,” Jay whispers in my ear.

“I didn’t do it for him. I did it for me.” I flash a smile as Jay sits down with a soft grunt.

“Worried he might forget about your right hook again?”

I smile. “Worried? Not at all. Having fun?”

“Not even a little bit. Cassandra is making lasagna tonight, so I’m thinking about grabbing a six-pack and going to her place.”

I roll my eyes. “A six-pack with lasagna? Take red wine. And why didn’t you bring her with you? The food here is amazing.”

“I asked her, but she’s not ready to meet the crew yet.”

I nod. “Smart lady.”

“So, you’ll find another ride home, and I can cut out now?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I can grab an Uber. Go have fun with your smart new lady.” I’m jealous as hell because I want to leave, too. But I haven’t even put in face time with the captain, so he can see that I got dolled up and did the whole dog and pony show.

“I will. Thanks, Frankie.” Without another word, Jay gets up, strolling toward the captain who’s holding court with a commander and a few sergeants.

Before I can do the same, a journalist steps in front of me. “Detective DeMarco, I’m Sarah Murphy from?”

“I know who you are, Miss Murphy. You do the crime beat for the Times.”

“That’s right. I’d like to do a profile on you for the paper.”

I frown. “Why? No one gives a damn about the life of a cop.” Most days people don’t even want to be bothered with law enforcement, not even when they need us. Luckily, homicide detectives are often exempt from that hate.

She laughs. “Usually, I would agree, but when the detective is beautiful, smart, and heading up a possible serial killer case, everyone will be interested. You are single-handedly keeping the city safe.”

A loud bark of laughter escapes, and when I scan the room, my gaze connects with Damien’s. “I wouldn’t say that at all. My partner is the lead on this case, and we have an entire team helping.”

“Modest, too. Think about it,” she says, pressing a business card into my hand before she spots someone more interesting and darts off.

Thank fucking goodness.

Seventy-five minutes into the ball, and I'm making my way to the door because it wouldn't look good if I'm seen running at full speed toward the nearest exit. I smile and offer my thanks to donors and farewells to other cops, edging closer and closer to the exit.

"DeMarco."

Dammit. I turn with a smile. "Yes, Captain?"

"Thanks for coming tonight. You snagged a big donation from Mr. Wolfe, and I hear you're sitting down with the Times for an interview."

"No, she railroaded me. I haven't agreed to anything yet."

"You should. But we can talk about it later. I just wanted you to know I see you, and I'm fine with you leaving. Early."

Of course. "Thanks, Captain. Enjoy the rest of your night." I rush through the ballroom doors and run smack into a warm, broad chest emanating a deliciously masculine scent. "Excuse me."

"We meet again, Francesca."

I look up into Damien's teasing hazel eyes and smile. "Frankie. We do, but only to say goodbye."

"So soon?" He seems genuinely disappointed, which I think is weird, but okay.

"Yeah, these types of events aren't really my scene. I've made my appearance and now I'm heading home."

“Would you like a ride?”

Hell, yes, I do, but how does he know? “Uhhh,” I choke. I know better. And why does this man leave me speechless?

“I promise to keep my hands to myself.” He puts one hand over his heart and holds the other up like he’s about to be sworn into court. “Promise.”

The gesture makes me laugh. “I have a gun in my purse, so yeah, I’ll accept your offer.” I must be crazy. Just because he’s hotter than sin, rich, and charming doesn’t mean he’s not dangerous. Probably more dangerous than the average-looking non-billionaires roaming the planet freely.

“Feel free to let your partner know that I’m giving you a ride home,” he says with a gleam in his eyes. “You know, just in case you’re worried about your safety. Or your honor.”

His comment catches me off guard, but I can’t deny he’s got a point. I fish my phone out and shoot Jay a quick message about my ride home. “All right, lead the way.”

He clasps my hand, his touch both authoritative and tender. “Follow me.”

When we reach the valet station, I’m hardly shocked to see a pricey electric luxury vehicle roll up. “A Taycan? Now you’re just showing off.”

His hazel eyes widen. “And you know cars, which means I’m halfway in love with you already.”

Another chuckle escapes me as I slide into the passenger seat, reveling in the supple leather embracing me. The seat’s warmth and plushness, coupled with that opulent scent, is divine. “Sweet ride. What made you go electric?”

“Speed.”

“Okay,” I say. “Good answer. Top speed?”

“Close to one-sixty. Want to test it out?” There’s a teasing glint in his eyes that’s absolutely contagious.

“You know I am the law.”

He laughs. “You’re a homicide detective, not a traffic cop, Frankie.”

“Good point, but also no. I’d prefer to make it home in one piece.”

“Excellent point. It is one beautiful piece, too.”

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. “By the way, you’ll need my address to get there.” I rattle off my address, and he speaks it into the navigation system without missing a beat.

He gives me a sidelong glance, a smirk playing on his lips. “All set. Let’s get you home safely, beautiful Frankie.” His eyes darken as we merge into traffic.

Damn. His words send a shiver of lust down my spine. “You’re just saying that because I’m in this fancy dress.”

“I saw you on TV, remember? Gray suit with a light purple blouse. It showed off just enough of everything.” His smile grows before his gaze flicks back to the road.

I laugh again. “So, you hear about a murder and you’re sizing up the cop investigating it?”

He dismisses it casually. “Why not? There’s always some murder or another in this city, right? I like staying informed about my city.”

“Unfortunately,” I agree easily. “But the question still stands.”

“In the spirit of honesty,” he begins, handling the steering wheel like a champ even if he is going about fifteen miles over the speed limit. “The newscaster was talking, but your face was on the screen, so I muted her and watched you.”

“Like a stalker.”

He laughs. “Like a very observant man,” he counters. “It’s all about perspective.”

“If you say so, Damien.”

“I do. Where would you like to go on our date?”

I turn to him with a playful, almost flirty smile. “Aren’t you supposed to figure that out?”

“Sure, but I haven’t gotten to know you well enough to know what you like and, more importantly, what you don’t like.”

“Fine. I love Mexican food the best, followed by Italian and Greek. Pretty much anything Asian except sushi. I like my meat cooked.” I realize what I say seconds later, but Damien doesn’t comment on it.

“Thanks for the help.” His smile is sincere, not playful or teasing, and not flirtatious. “I hate guessing games.”

“Me too, so I’ll ask, why me?”

His brows dip. “Why you, what?”

“Why do you want to go out with me?” I’m not fishing for compliments. I just like to know where I stand. “Be honest.”

He’s quiet for a full minute, following the navigation system and efficiently weaving through traffic. At a stoplight, he turns to me. “For starters, you’re gorgeous as hell. Been having the dirtiest thoughts about you all evening,” he admits. “For another, you’re smart and capable. And tough. I like a tough woman, and I like it more that you don’t treat me like I’m special just because I have a lot of money.”

“You have a lot of money?” I laugh at his shocked look. “At least three people asked me how I know a billionaire tech genius.”

His brows lift, a playful glint dancing in his eyes. “They called me a genius?”

I stare at him for a second and then burst out laughing. “Seriously?”

“What? It’s always nice to hear,” he insists with a chuckle.

All too soon, we’re turning onto my block, and disappointment washes over me. The evening will soon be over and for the first time in a long damn time, I’m sad to see a man go.

“Hey, Frankie. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, just thinking about how surprising this evening has been.” That’s all I’m willing to admit, at least to Damien.

“It’s been surprising for me, too. Usually, I hate these things. Everyone either has their hand out for money or photos, or they’re looking to snag a rich husband.”

“Poor little rich tech genius?”

He laughs, totally not offended by my teasing, which is a point in his favor. “No, just exhausting. Tonight was exhilarating, and I think it’s all because of you.”

The car comes to a stop at the curb right in front of my house, and I sigh before I turn to Damien, smiling. “I guess we’ll find out if you ever figure out where you’re taking me for dinner, Mr. Wolfe.” With those words, I step from the car and close the door with a reluctant sigh.

“Frankie, wait up!” Damien jumps out of the car and catches up to me. “I’ll walk you to your door.”

It’s an unexpected gesture. Most men assume I can fend for myself—which I can—but it’s nice of him to offer. “That’s sweet.”

“That’s me, a sweet billionaire tech genius.” He laughs before his hand goes to the small of my back. “Nice place.”

“It is, and it’s mine.” It’s what matters to me most, that I have a place that is all mine.

We reach my doorstep too soon, and I turn to look up at Damien. “Thanks for the ride. And the walk to the door.”

“My pleasure.” His smile is warm as he leans forward, and I think, no, I know he’s going to kiss me.

My body heats up until I feel a bead of sweat slide down my spine in anticipation of the feel of his lips, soft and thick, against my own. It’s been too fucking long since I’ve had a man between my thighs, making me writhe and moan with pleasure. And now that the chance is here, I’m hungry for it.

But Damien's lips never touch mine. His lips land on my forehead in a kiss that's so tenderly sweet, so soft and equally hot that my panties go up in flames.

"Good night, Frankie. Sweet dreams."

My gaze stays on him as he jogs down the four steps that take him back to his sleek black car. He slides behind the steering wheel and turns to me, motioning for me to go inside. With a smile, I do just that, realizing I can't hear his electric car pulling away.

I'm so fucking giddy as I push the door closed, I can't stand it. My smile is so wide that my cheeks ache, but I temper my glee with a big dose of reality. I'm a broke-ass homicide detective, a cop, and he's rich and famous, plus a legit genius. We have nothing in common.

Nothing at all.

"Except for sizzling chemistry," I say, because it feels like a key factor. "He's probably just being nice," I say to myself because that's what rich guys do. They're either ruthless or too kind, too nice, to stay on the right side of the law.

My fingertips brush against my forehead, thinking about the kiss because there was nothing nice about that kiss. It was an intense forehead kiss, and it surprised me. Nothing ever surprises me. Rarely, anyway.

I wonder what else Mr. Wolfe has up his sleeve.

I bet Google knows.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Damien

Waiting.

This is the way you play the game. And I should know. I invented the freakin' game.

Last night, after dropping Francesca off on her doorstep and teasing her with a forehead kiss, I spent too many hours watching her.

My head hit the pillow to thoughts of her, and when I wake up the morning after, she's the first thing on my mind. For the first time in too damn long, my thoughts aren't about Olivia or the work I'm doing to help her.

I'm not thinking about revenge or the next name on my list. It's just Francesca, and the image I carry with me is the desire that swam in her eyes last night as she looked up at me, hoping I would kiss her.

I really fucking wanted to.

But the time isn't right. Not yet. For me to have what I want—exactly how I want it—I need to do everything the right way. And that means waiting.

And watching.

But can I wait? That is the question now.

I grow hard watching Francesca go about her weekend tasks, completely oblivious to the fact that I'm watching her. She wakes up and goes down to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, still wearing the checkered boxer shorts and plain white tank top she sleeps in.

Her sleepwear shows off long, well-muscled thighs and calves, sculpted arms and narrow waist that speaks of a woman who takes care of herself. My mouth waters to get up close and personal with the pretty detective.

Her nipples poke at the cotton of her tank top, and I can't stop staring at them. I can't stop thinking about all the ways I'll make her moan and scratch her nails down my back. Her nipples are always so fucking hard, tempting and teasing like they're begging me to pull them into my mouth and suck as hard as she can stand it.

Even as she scrambles eggs in a bowl while the coffee brews, her tits are jiggling behind the tank top. "I'll bet they're sweet like ripe summer cherries. I bet those nipples are as sweet as the rest of you, aren't they kitten?" I imagine she tastes like hot salty honey with a hint of caramel.

All morning, I'm rock-hard watching Francesca...err... Frankie putter around the house. She eats breakfast before she gets up to clean the kitchen and then the living room. Her home is spotless, so really, she's just straightening and dusting. As I watch her engaging in mundane tasks, I vow to get her a housekeeper of her own.

A woman like Frankie is too good, too beautiful, and entirely too fucking smart to waste precious hours cleaning. She should be chasing down criminals like me, keeping the good citizens of Los Angeles safe, not dusting.

I switch screens when she heads upstairs to the shower but a quick call from Jess distracts me from watching Frankie in the shower. Dammit. I listen to my assistant with half an ear, my eyes scanning through screens until I find Frankie again. This

time, she's wearing nothing but a towel as she steps into her bedroom.

I can't look away from her, her gorgeous tits or the way she lets the towel drop to her feet, almost as if she knows I'm watching. The thought of her putting on a show, thinking she's alone, has me rock hard.

I wish I could hear her thoughts in this moment—is she thinking about me? Does she know how much I want her? After she moisturizes her body, she pulls the purple negligee from her dresser drawer and slides it on, the silky fabric clinging to her curves.

Frankie steps in front of her full-length mirror, adjusting the straps and smoothing the material over her hips. She twirls slowly, admiring her reflection, a faint smile playing on her lips. She looks like a goddess, every inch perfection. My hand tightens around my cock, aching for relief.

She pauses, looking herself up and down. Her eyes linger on the way the negligee hugs her body before she reaches into the drawer again, this time pulling out the stockings. She looks at them one at a time like she's wondering something. I wish I could read her mind and know what she's thinking right now.

Frankie sits on the edge of the bed, sliding them over her long legs, each motion deliberate and sensual.

Oh, kitten. What a beautiful surprise.

On her feet again, she glances in the mirror one more time, adjusting the stockings until they're just right. The sight of her in that purple lingerie, looking so confident and sexy, makes my cock throb in my hand.

Apparently satisfied with her look, she turns away from the mirror. Her hands skim

over her hips, smoothing the silky fabric one last time before she moves to the bed. She leans back, propping herself up on her elbows. Her legs stretch out, long and inviting.

Her eyes close briefly, and she takes a deep breath. When her eyes open again, they're filled with a hunger that matches my own. Her hand starts at her collarbone, tracing a slow path down her body. Her fingers linger on her breasts, circling her nipples through the fabric.

I can almost feel the heat of her touch, the softness of her skin. My grip on my cock tightens, my strokes becoming more urgent. I'm aching for her, desperate to be the one touching her, tasting her.

But for now, I just watch.

Her hand continues its descent, sliding over her stomach, her hips, until it reaches the hem of her negligee. She teases the edge, her fingers dipping beneath the fabric briefly before retreating. She's drawing this out, making herself wait, unknowingly driving me wild.

Finally, Frankie's hand slips between her thighs. Her back arches slightly, her lips parting on a soft gasp. I watch her fingers sliding through her folds, circling her clit.

I stroke my cock in time with her movements, my body tense with anticipation. "Oh fuck." A jolt of pleasure surges through me as she gasps the words, arching her back, chasing her release. "Fuck," she repeats, but there's a hint of frustration in her voice. She needs more.

She needs me .

"That's right, kitten. Fuck yourself good." I stroke my cock, eager for her next move.

Her fingers circle her clit faster, her body writhing on the bed. “Yes,” she moans, over and over. “Oh fuck.” She squirms, lost in her solo pleasure. Then, abruptly, she stops.

I pause, brows furrowing. Why did she stop? Before I can process, she reaches into her nightstand and pulls out a hot pink toy. A growl escapes me, my grip tightening. “That’s it, Francesca. Fuck yourself for me.”

The toy buzzes to life as she slides it across her wet pussy lips. Her smile is sinful, legs twitching as the vibrations intensify. “Fuck,” she hisses.

I match her pace, stroking my cock quickly, imagining her tight cunt squeezing me. My body tenses. “Come for me, kitten.”

Her skin flushes pink, pussy glistening. Toes curling, one leg extends while the other falls to the side, offering me a perfect view of her swollen, shiny lips.

“Oh, God, yes!” she cries out. “Damien, yes!”

Hearing my name on her lips sends a shockwave through me. “I’m right here, my precious pet. Let me hear you scream my name again.”

She moves the vibrator, teasing her clit before plunging it back into her cunt. Her body starts convulsing and twitching. “Damien, yes! Fuck me.”

The sight of her in the throes of passion, knowing I’m the one she’s thinking about, is too much. My cock explodes in my hand, but I can’t look away as her orgasm goes on and on. Each time she moans, it’s my name on her lips.

“Damien,” she whispers one last time, breathless, before her body sinks into the mattress, a smile playing on her lips.

I can't tear my eyes away. Francesca is even more perfect than I realized. This—she—is going to be my greatest game yet. Soon, my precious pet. Soon I will fill you with this cock and make you mine.

Sweat slicks my skin, and my cock softens in my hand. I love it, but I can't let this happen. I'm the one in charge here, not Frankie. This is my game. I make the rules, and only I can change them as the game progresses.

I clean myself up quickly. While Francesca basks in the afterglow, I find the business card she gave me and shoot off a quick text message.

Tonight. 7 pm. Creative black tie. Dress accordingly.

My eyes stay fixed on the screen as her phone buzzes on the nightstand.

Francesca goes completely still, pausing briefly before she blindly reaches behind her for the phone. She takes a deep breath and swipes across the screen, bringing it to life. Her eyes scan the message, and her smile grows.

She immediately texts back. I'll be ready.

Good. I have a few hours to take care of business, and then Francesca will be mine.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Frankie

I look around The Edwardian, an upscale restaurant where the waitstaff, including the women, dress in black or white tuxedos. They all look like they belong on the runway—not one fucking hair is out of place. I get a sea of perfect smiles aimed my way, and suddenly, I'm uncomfortable.

In my work capacity, I could stroll in here and command everyone to shut the hell up and do as I say, but as a guest, I feel way out of my league.

Luckily, Damien doesn't feel the same. He's standing tall, comfortable with his place in the world, and the staff treat him as if he's royalty.

"Relax," he whispers in my ear. His warm breath sends a tantalizing shiver racing across my skin. The way his lips brush my ear is almost too much.

I straighten, trying to mask the electric jolt caused by his touch. Turning to him, I grin. "Who says I'm not relaxed?"

"I do," he whispers back, a teasing lilt in his voice. "You're tense as hell, and I'm trying to figure out why."

"This," I reply but stop short as we reach our table. The view is spectacular. I can see the whole damn city below on one side and the sparkling water of the ocean on the other. In all its glitz, glamour, and grime, this is my city. My home. And tonight, it's

beautiful.

“This?” His smile is teasing, but there’s pure curiosity in his eyes.

“It’s just a little intimidating at first,” I admit with a shrug. “But these are just people with more money than most of us. Not special. Not better, just different.”

“I like the way you look at things. It’s wise and refreshing.”

Our gazes lock together in an intense stare-down that lasts until the waiter returns to take our drink orders. “That’s me, wise and refreshing,” I say, a playful challenge in my tone.

The waiter arrives, clearing his throat to get our attention. We give him our food and drink orders all at once, both of us seemingly eager to get on with the getting-to-know-you portion of the date.

“So, Francesca, tell me about your job. How did you become a police officer?”

“Damien, please. Call me Frankie.”

He cracks a grin. “I’m sorry. I know you’ve told me before. I’ll do my best. Please continue, Frankie .”

I smile, feeling a flutter of excitement. “Thank you. Francesca sounds so harsh.” I take a sip of water from the crystal glass. “So, my dad, Franklin DeMarco, was also a cop, well, a detective. I wanted to be just like him for as long as I can remember.” It’s mostly the truth, but the entire truth isn’t exactly first-date material. Or second date.

Or third .

He leans forward, and a slow smile lights up his eyes. “Have you ever caught a serial killer before?”

I stare back for a moment, weighing how I want to answer the question. I lean in and Damien does the same, unconsciously mimicking my body language. “You shouldn’t believe everything you see or read on the internet.”

His smile grows. “What shouldn’t I believe?”

I sit back when our waiter places my cocktail in front of me. “As a general rule, you shouldn’t believe anything, but that’s just my opinion.”

His brows arch up in amused curiosity. “Not a fan of the press?”

I shake my head slightly. “Can’t say I am. But I do respect the journalists who report the facts without resorting to hype and clickbait. The media companies are businesses, after all, so they need to captivate their audience with every new twist and turn. Higher ratings equal higher profits.”

“But isn’t that how you receive tips that help in cracking the case? News media and the internet as you say?”

“Hardly,” I snort dismissively. “But when people are scared, they do really stupid things that complicate my work. And it puts them at greater risk.” I give my head a shake and tell him an old police story about foolish leads, running in circles, and an additional casualty. “It’s a catch-22 situation. I want the public to be vigilant, but I also want them safe.”

He nods slowly, his gaze never leaving my face. “You’re not just tough, Frankie. You’ve got a hard shell with a marshmallow interior.”

I jab a finger in his direction. “Zip it, wise guy, or I’ll spread the word that you’re not actually the brilliant mastermind you claim to be.”

His eyes go wide. “You wouldn’t.”

“I might. Don’t test me.” I take a sip of my cocktail, laughing when he holds up his hands in a defensive gesture. “How about you, genius? How does one get into the tech genius field?”

He gives me a deep laugh. It’s a little smooth, like really good booze.

“I created an app, and it did well, so I created another one. It also did well, and they kept doing well, so I kept going until I had a building with my name on the front.”

That much I know. “But you don’t just create games and calendars and stuff like that, do you?”

Surprise flashes in his eyes, and his smile gets bigger. “No, I don’t. You’re right. My company has evolved way beyond apps. We’re now delving into cutting-edge fields like AI and neurofeedback technology. In fact, I’ve partnered with a brilliant neuroengineer to push the boundaries of what’s possible in those areas.”

“Wow. That’s impressive,” I say. “So, you really are a big deal?”

He shrugs. “In some circles. Same as you.”

My laugh is louder this time, drawing eyes from the nearby diners. “I’m not a big deal in any circles. Sorry to tell you.”

Damien shakes his head, leans in, swirls the amber liquid in his glass, and hypnotizes me with his smile.

“That’s where your powers of deductive reasoning fail you, Frankie. People are completely intrigued by you. It’s not just your beauty, which is the kind of beauty that men fight over. It’s also your strength. Everything about you screams, don’t fuck with me. But your femininity and grace are unmatched.”

If he only knew...

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come, and I close it immediately.

His eyes darken, as if he can read my mind. “You crave me, Frankie. Every inch of your body is aching for my touch. You want to surrender to the desire that’s consuming you.”

His words surprise me. He’s so bold, yet they are like a caress, igniting a fire within me. Instantly, my fuck session with myself this afternoon comes back to my mind, and I envision myself in my fantasy with him.

I want to melt into his embrace, to let him have me completely. His confidence is intoxicating, and he’s absolutely right. I want him with an intensity that threatens to unravel me. Yet, I try to remain calm and choke out, “Is that so?”

But he’s not just any man. He’s a billionaire genius, and the complications that come with his wealth and power could throw my life into chaos. As if chasing a serial killer wasn’t enough to deal with already.

I want to give in to the promise in his eyes even though I know I shouldn’t, even though I know my life is too busy right now to lose myself in a fling with a handsome, charming man.

“You’re overthinking this, Frankie. You want me so what else is there to think about?” He finishes his drink, his every move confident and graceful. “It’s simple,

really.”

“Simple?” I laugh, shaking my head. “Something tells me nothing about you is simple, Damien.”

His lips curve into a confident smirk. “You’re right about that, Detective. I’m not like other men who are all talk and no action. I have the skill and finesse to satisfy your every need, to awaken desires you never even knew existed.”

I smile at his bold declaration. “You sound quite sure of yourself. What makes you think no other man has ever achieved that?”

He leans in closer, his breath hot against my ear. “Because if he had, you wouldn’t be here with me right now.”

A shiver runs down my spine at his words. “You take confidence to a whole new level.”

Damien takes my hand in his, his touch electric. His eyes hold me captive, and I feel a storm of desire swirling inside. “Even now, your mind is filled with thoughts of us tangled together, my cock buried deep inside you. You’re aching for it, but you so badly want to be a good girl, don’t you?”

“I am not good, and I’m sure as hell not a girl,” I say, my voice breathless.

Heat darkens his gaze. “I bet that if I were to slip my hand between your thighs right now, I’d find you dripping wet for me.”

My breath catches in my throat, and my pussy clenches with need. He’s absolutely correct, and it’s taking every ounce of my self-control to keep my expression blank. When I’m certain my voice won’t betray me, I uncross my legs and lean forward.

“I’ll take that bet.”

Damien’s nostrils flare as his hand reaches under the table and grips my knee, slowly gliding up my thigh. His touch is both torturous and electrifying. With each inch he advances, he studies my face intently, gauging my reaction. “The heat emanating from your center is like a magnetic fire, pulling me in.”

Oh, fuck me. The slightly rough slide of his hand against my thighs is almost too much to bear. I want to bite down on my lip, grip his wrist and put his hands exactly where my body is craving his touch. But I don’t do that. I watch, aware that my heart is kicking against my chest like a bucking horse. I want this. I want him .

Badly.

“Should you give in to your desires?” he whispers, his voice low and seductive. “Should you demand that I take you home right now?” His hand continues up my thigh, and my breath hitches as he nears my aching core.

He’s so close, and at that moment, I know I’m going to give in. I’m going to do this with him. Just one night. I’d be a fool to resist.

“When you’re ready,” he growls, his thumb grazing my thigh—right there, “just say the word.” Damien pulls back with a wicked grin, rising to his feet and extending his hand to me. “Dance with me.”

Dance. He works me up to a fever pitch, and now he wants to dance. “There’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance,” I say, taking his hand.

“I know,” he smirks, pulling me close. “I straddle that line every single day.”

“Duly noted.” I allow him to lead me to the dance floor, where a few other couples

are holding each other closely, smiling and talking softly.

Damien turns and pulls me flush against him, our bodies molding together perfectly. His muscles are evident even through his expensive suit. I can't help but let my hands roam, imagining how he'd feel beneath me with no barriers between us.

His dirty talk from earlier replays in my mind, making my mouth dry and my pussy ache with need.

I can't deny it any longer. I want him, badly. Maybe even need him. Now that I know he's got the body and the filthy mouth to back up his confidence, I know I've never had anything compared to what he can do to me.

"You're an excellent dancer," I say, trying to keep my voice even.

He smiles. "Thanks. It's like playing golf, a necessary evil in my life. Until this moment, I didn't give a damn about dancing."

I smile at his unintended compliment. "I guess I never really thought about it."

"Most don't until they find the right partner." He grinds against me, letting me feel just how hard he is. And fuck, he's big. I'll definitely be feeling it tomorrow.

"Well, that's certainly one way to tempt me, Mr. Wolfe."

His lips curl into a wolfish grin, no pun intended, and he whispers in my ear. "Is it working, Frankie? Are you ready to give in to temptation?"

Fuck yes. As the music changes, my mind's made up. Tonight, I'm going to have him. We'll fuck each other senseless, getting lost in pleasure until we're both completely satisfied.

Just one night of white hot passion, of carnal bliss with the hottest man I've ever known and then I'll get back to my life and my work.

But right now, all I want to do is fuck this man until I can't move.

And I plan to enjoy every filthy, naughty, dirty second of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Frankie

Before the song even ends, Damien has my hand in his, my fingers dwarfed in his huge palm. We rush to the elevator, laughing like giddy teenagers who know they're up to no good.

In the empty elevator, Damien quickly presses his mouth on mine before the doors slide shut, and with that act, he completely consumes me. Nothing else exists at this moment, not the elevator taking us to the ground floor, not the sounds around the city just outside the window, not even the air I need to breathe.

Finally, a bell chimes, and the door opens. "Damien," I murmur against his lips.

He pulls back, looking slightly dazed. Clasp my hand possessively, he says, "Come on," and tugs me out of the building into the warm night air.

I follow without question until the bright lights of an expensive hotel come into view. By then, my woman and my cop brain kick into high gear. Two blocks later, we're inside the hotel, and two minutes later, Damien has a key card in one hand and the other wound tightly around my waist.

The moment we step inside the VIP elevator, his mouth and hands are all over me again. His lips touch my collarbone, and my head falls back just as a moan explodes out of me. His hands start in my hair, sliding down my back until they cup my ass and bring me flush against his thick cock. "Damien," I moan and press my body against

his.

He growls from somewhere deep in his chest, and it sends another shiver racing through me. My hard nipples ache for the cool, wet feel of his tongue. My body is on fire, and I'm not sure I can wait until we get to the penthouse floor.

Luckily for me, the elevator stops, the doors slide open, and Damien waltzes me from the elevator. Despite how fancy and expensive everything is, from the carpet to the flower vases dotting the hall between the elevator and the room door, I can only think about all the red flags waving in front of me. I come to a dead stop at the halfway point.

“Having second thoughts?”

I nod, glancing at Damien's chiseled jaw, and then the hotel door at the end of the hall, mocking me while also promising me a damn good time. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Ahh. The good girl returns,” he says in a flirty tone.

I put a hand on his chest, refusing to let his taunting change my mind. I want him but I need some answers.

“Why are we at a hotel? Do you have a wife and kids at home?” He wouldn't be the first married man to play the single game.

His lips spread into a smile that turns into a laugh. “I just wanted to impress a beautiful woman.” He takes my hands, pulling me against him and tilting my head up so we're eye to eye. “The truth is, I can't wait to have you, and this is the closest hotel to the restaurant. But,” he says, brushing the softest kiss to my lips before pulling back, “if you want to go to my place or yours, I'll try to make it without dying of want.”

My body coils so tight with the need to come, a real, man-caused orgasm, that I'll believe anything he says that'll get us inside a room where he'll fulfill every dirty promise he's made this evening.

"Later," he growls before nipping my ear. "I promise to take you to my house and fuck you on every surface in my home." Then his mouth is on mine again, and before I know it, we're on the inside of the door, and he presses my back against it.

I feel more feminine than I have in a really long time. The parts of me I keep hidden and professional sink below the surface, and I lean into the silky, soft, delicate parts as Damien's fingers dance down my arms and across my collarbone. He kisses me like I'm precious, cupping the back of my neck as he moves across my body.

"This has to go," he whispers as he lowers the straps of my dress before searching for the hidden zipper, touching me until I shake with need. "Much better," he coos as the silky fabric slides to the floor. His gaze is so dark as he takes in the sight of me in nothing but black lace. "Fuck, Frankie."

"Yes, please," I moan, breathless at the naked need burning in his eyes.

"Perfect." He grips my panties at the hip and in one quick yank, they're in tatters on the floor. "Even better," he grunts before burying his face between my thighs, but Damien isn't a quick draw. Oh no. He takes his time, breathing in the scent of me while roughly massaging the back of my thighs and my ass.

"Damien," I pant because his teasing is too much. I'm too tightly wound, too close to the edge for playful.

"Yes?" He parts my folds with his thumbs, licking me everywhere but my clit. It feels good, the wet slide of his tongue against sensitive flesh, but it's not enough, and I can't push the words past my lips because every once in a while, his tongue grazes

the edge of my clit, and it feels incredible.

“You need more, Francesca?”

I nod.

“Look at me.” His voice is firm and commanding, and I like it.

Obedying him, I fix my gaze on his hazel eyes that seem to be full of fire. There’s something in his eyes that I can’t explain, but it’s dark, like really and genuinely dark. Instead of being scared, I’m intrigued. I want to know about that spark of madness that tells me he’s not all that he seems.

“Fuck,” I moan when he flattens his tongue and rubs it against my clit. “Damien.”

He lifts one leg and then the other over his shoulders, exposing me to him completely. The heat in his gaze is too much, too intense, and I feel pleasure flood my pussy.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers before his lips are on me again, slowly French kissing my pussy until I’m a soaking wet, quivering mess of want and need barreling headfirst towards an orgasm.

“Damien.” I pant his name when my toes start to curl, and my knees shake.

“Come for me, Frankie. I want you to come all over my tongue and drip down my chin.”

“Oh, hell.” I want to roll my eyes, but goddammit, those dirty words are doing the trick. The pussy kissing and then two thick fingers invading me are exactly the right one-two combo I need to go flying off the edge and straight into the land of orgasms.

“Damien, yes,” I whimper-moan as my limbs start to relax, despite the fact that his tongue is still moving.

He gets to his feet with my legs still on his shoulders and carries me to the bedroom. Even though it’s just a few steps through the suite, he flicks his tongue against my clit, making my toes curl while pulling feral moans of pleasure from my body.

“Such a good girl,” he growls, slipping his tongue deep inside of me. “So obedient.”

So many emotions flicker through me at once that I can’t focus on just one. They all threaten to pull me under. Another swipe of his tongue, and my eyes roll back. “Damien.” Another lick, and my thigh tightens on his neck. “Fuck,” I groan softly as his lips cover my clit, and he sucks with a growl. I’m lost.

Totally fucking lost, and we’re just getting started. He tosses me on the bed like I’m some delicate flower, licking his lips like I’m the dessert on tonight’s menu.

“Francesca, my sweet little kitten.” His words are thick with lust, his gaze dark and full of heat as he slowly flicks open each button on his crisp shirt. Once the buttons are undone, he moves faster, tearing off his clothes so quickly that his movements almost become a blur. He moves lightning quick until he’s down to his briefs that show off his impressive cock, long and thick, pressing against the dark fabric.

It’s not just his cock, though. All of him is fucking magnificent. His thighs are thick and strong, cradling his cock as if to highlight its splendor. It’s hard to look anywhere else, but my gaze crawls up his body, kissed with a golden glow that makes his abs—a six-pack, of course—a work of art. His pecs are hard and tight, with pale brown nipples and thick, rippled arms that bunch and flex with his every movement.

“Damien,” I sigh breathlessly and lick my lips.

“Lie back,” he says in a deep voice that commands obedience.

I don’t consider myself an obedient woman, but my legs part. Timid at first, but his glare emboldens me, and I spread them wider until the cool air swirling around the room hits me. “Ah.”

His lips part into a grin. “Perfect.” He kneels on the bed, letting his palms run up and down the length of my legs in a slow rhythm that has me trembling. “Look at how pink your pretty pussy is. How wet and glistening you are.” His fingertip traces my lips before slipping between them, brushing back and forth against my clit and my opening. “Just for me,” he growls before sinking one finger deep.

“Damien!” My legs spread even wider, silently begging for more. “Please.”

He adds a second finger, pumping slowly, enough to tease and titillate but nowhere near enough to satisfy. “What is it, Francesca? What do you need?”

“You,” I say. “More. This.” I’m incoherent as words escape me while his magic fingers play me like an instrument.

“Look at me, Frankie.”

My eyes snap open at his use of my nickname. The way he goes back and forth between Francesca and Frankie makes me feel like two different people.

“Good girl. Eyes on me.”

That’s easy to do considering how beautiful he is, but every stroke makes it harder and harder. My body is shaking as he stretches me out deliciously, that pleasure-pain sensation so intense my nipples bead even tighter.

The thumb on his free hand lands on my clit, rubbing fast circles that feel so good, so incredible, I can feel my body temperature rise. Tears pool at the corners of my eyes, the desire to close my eyes and give in to the pleasure so strong, and my fight against it is causing me pain.

And shit, it feels good.

“Such a good girl, Francesca.” His gaze is dark as he watches me, smiling with each new sensation he causes. “You’ve been so good, Frankie. When I tell you to, I want you to come.”

I open my mouth to tell him it doesn’t work like that in real life, but he crooks his fingers in that perfect way, and I feel the orgasm simmering deep beneath the surface. “Okay,” I pant, earning another smile.

Fuck me, the things I’ll do for that smile.

“Take your thumb and forefinger and pinch your nipples.” There’s that commanding voice again, and I obey.

I follow his direction, pinching my nipples just enough to enhance my pleasure.

“More,” he growls. “Until I tell you to stop.”

I do as I’m told, applying more and more pressure, waiting for him to tell me it’s enough because that stinging sensation doesn’t feel good, at least not until it does. That pain hits my pussy and my eyes instinctively flutter shut.

Damien’s hand stops moving.

My eyes fly open to see him staring at me with one brow arched. “Fuck.” I open my

eyes and keep them on him, waiting for his touch to re-ignite that fire. I swear, a fucking eternity passes before he moves again, but my nipples ache deliciously, and suddenly, I'm fighting to keep my orgasm at bay until he tells me to let go.

"Ah, you're greedy for that climax, aren't you, my precious pet?" His voice is like honey, low and smooth, slightly amused.

"Damien," I whisper.

He laughs. I'm teetering on the edge of everything that's holy, and he's laughing. This man knows exactly what he's doing. I notice the bead of sweat slide down from his hairline, and my orgasm pushes closer to the surface. My legs tremble, but I try to hold back.

"Oh God, Damien. I'm going?—"

"No! You're not ready yet." His fingers work on my G-spot, and a few seconds later, I'm breathless. My whole body tenses and shakes. I've never felt this way before. No man has ever done this to me.

Damien's hand goes to my throat, and he squeezes gently at first, but then his hand goes tighter. Oh God, is he going to kill me?

"Okay, Frankie, let it go," he says and squeezes my neck a little tighter. What have I done...oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus. My vision goes dark around the edges as he says, "Come, Francesca. Let it go. Let me watch you let go. Now."

Just as he says, now, the pleasure shoots to the surface like a pressure cooker, and I explode. The best orgasm of my life tears me to pieces. I let out grunts and moans that sound nothing short of a feral animal. A wild beast, leaving nothing but sweaty, tattered shreds. Damien releases my throat, my body still quivering.

I'm boneless.

And embarrassed.

Damien kicks off his briefs, giving me a brief glimpse of his cock before he's between my thighs, smacking my clit with the heavy length of him.

"You're such a good girl, Frankie. You deserve a reward." He holds up his hand, his fingers slick with my juices. "Me first." His eyes sparkle as his tongue glides up his middle finger, moaning with delight. "Fucking delicious."

My brows shoot up at his words. I love sex as much as the next woman, but this? This isn't regular sex. This is a fucking experience, and I'm hungry for more.

Damien leans forward, the heavy weight of his cock adding pressure against my clit, pulling a moan from me. "Taste."

I hesitate. I'm not one of those girls who experiments. I've never kissed a college roommate or finger-banged my best friend. No judgment, it's just not my thing, but with Damien's fingers hovering over my mouth, I flick my tongue out because I can't say no to this man.

"Go on, Frankie. Taste yourself on my fingers."

I give his index finger another tentative flick of my tongue, shivering at the way his cock twitches against me. I do it again and his cock jerks against me again. As I wrap my lips around the tip of his index finger, Damien growls and positions himself right at my opening.

"Open up for me, kitten."

I open my mouth, moaning in shock when he slides his fingers against my bottom lip before sticking them in my mouth. I want to protest, but two things stop me. The feel of his cock stretching me out as he sinks into me and the salty-sweet taste of my juices on his thick fingers. This time, the moan is long and low, full of satisfaction.

“Suck them,” he demands, and I do it, curious to see how he responds. His cock swells inside me, hitting every nerve ending within me as I suck every drop of myself from his lips. “Fuck, Frankie. That’s so good.”

His hips begin to move at a fast pace. Long, deep strokes tease me, but the fast pace pushes me closer and closer to insanity. I’ve already come twice, but I already know that the way he’s fucking me means I have at least one more orgasm in the chamber. “Fuck,” I moan around his fingers, pushing my hips forward to take more of him.

He gives me the rest of his cock, and I’m so full I suck in a deep breath. He’s so big, probably too big if I wasn’t so drenched from two orgasms, and the discomfort is only enhancing my pleasure.

“That’s right, Frankie,” he says in a voice hoarse with lust. “Take all of me.”

I don’t know how he knows what I’m thinking, and I’m sure I’ll obsess about it later, but right now, my only focus is on the way his cock is touching me everywhere. He’s so thick that every glide sends sparks flying under my skin until I’m on fire, hungry and desperate to put it out while also prolonging it.

His hips move in a perfect rhythm, and I know he’s close as well. Watching the way the muscles in his neck pop out, the way his jaw clenches without his gaze ever leaving mine, is so fucking erotic that I can’t stop the orgasm as it erupts.

“Damien!” My body bows and arches, tenses, and then convulses as the orgasm rips through my body. It feels like the one time I tried surfing and got pulled under. Every

time I try to surface from the pleasure drowning me, another wave crashes over me, leaving me gasping and panting as I shake uncontrollably.

“You’re good,” he growls, fucking me deeper, grinding his hips against mine. Just as my orgasm crests and I start coming down, he rolls my clit between his fingers and starts me up all over again.

“Oh. My. God!” My body shakes as his cock explodes, filling me up even as juices flood my body between us. It’s never happened to me before, but right now, I lean into it. I savor it until it knocks me out.

Damien kisses my collarbone and my shoulder as his strokes slow down, allowing me to gently come down from the extreme pleasure. “Such a good little kitten,” he whispers before he grabs a handful of my hair, tugging it so hard I may have another orgasm. “Francesca,” he whispers before claiming me in a kiss that’s all fire and smoke, harsh and claiming.

Devastating.

I’m gasping when he pulls back, wearing a satisfied smile, my body still so sensitive I’m not sure if I want to pass out or fuck again.

His cock slips free, and he gathers me close in his arms, not bothering to clean up the mess between us. It’s sticky and wet, and as my eyelids flutter shut, it’s the last fucking thing on my mind.

Sometime later, Damien wakes me up again for another round of incredible sex that’s even better and more intense than the first round. I’m trembling long after orgasms four and five are just a memory, and I want more.

Like a drug addict needs another fix.

I'm in trouble and I know it. Morning sex so good I know I'll walk funny all day long, followed up by a kiss on my doorstep that's so deep and passionate, so hot that I'm on the verge of begging him to come inside and take me again.

This man is dangerous, which means the smart, modern woman that I am should steer clear.

But when he hits me with that sleepy smile and a sexy promise. "I'll see you soon, Francesca. Very soon," I know without a doubt that I won't steer clear.

I mean, jeez, I'm only human.

My hot shower is ruined by thoughts of being a plaything to a tech billionaire. That's all this is, right? Screw that. I'm not anyone's plaything, definitely not some rich guy who has the world at his fingertips.

Am I?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Frankie

This is the Black Bearded Iris, Francesca. Don't let the color fool you. Their beauty means elegance and power, two things that make me think of you.

D~

I rush into the precinct on Monday morning—twenty-three minutes late because, like a lovesick teenager, I spent fifteen minutes staring at the gorgeous flowers Damien had delivered to my door first thing this morning.

The night was everything I never knew I needed, but I am curious why he's so fascinated with me. He's handsome and intelligent, not to mention incredibly rich, so why is he so interested in an exhausted homicide detective? I need to figure it out so I can make sense of him as well as my own feelings.

Where this relationship could go. If we even have a relationship.

"Frankie, are you even listening?" The annoyance in Jay's tone tells me this isn't the first time he's tried to get my attention.

I blink and clear away the fog that comes with thoughts of Damien, shaking my head and trying for a smile. "Sorry, I was just thinking about the case," I lie smoothly.

Not smoothly enough, though, because Jay's brows dip in a familiar expression of

concern. I see his worry and brace myself for whatever has him so worked up. “Are you sure you’re up for it, Frankie? I don’t want you pushing yourself or getting too wrapped up in this fucker’s mind.”

“I’m fine, Jay.” It’s only a partial lie. I am fine. It’s just a different man distracting me from the serial killer I should be focused on.

“Are the murders getting to you?”

I shake my head. “Jay, I’ve dealt with plenty of murders, some of them a lot more gruesome than these. I’m good.”

“Maybe you need a vacation?” he offers. “Thanks to this asshole, we’ve been burning the candle at both ends. As soon as our shift is over, another body drops. I don’t know about you, but I’m sleeping like shit.”

I let out a soft sigh to hide my irritation with Jay questioning my ability to see this case through to the end. Still, I have to keep my boss happy and show him I have my head in the game.

“I am distracted, yes. But it’s not about the case, Jay. I’m fine and a little annoyed that we don’t have jack shit on this guy. Okay?”

He perks up. The sparkle in his eyes puts me on edge as he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Oh, yeah? Is this distraction about a man? Are you seeing someone?”

I look at him as if he’s grown two heads. “Are we gossiping in the locker room now about the cutest boys in school?”

Jay does his best to look not as interested as he clearly is, shrugging as he leans back

in his lopsided desk chair. “Figured we might as well talk about it since you can’t focus on the dead bodies. Tell me about him.”

I love Jay. He’s my partner and superior. I’ve learned so much from him since he took me under his wing. I trust him with my life. But I’m not going to share any details of my sex life with him. “Nothing. I went out to dinner and we’re just different, and that’s got me thinking.”

“Different is good.” He brushes a dismissive hand in my direction. “You and Nate worked together and look how that turned out.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah. We didn’t work out because we’re too similar, not because he’s a cheating prick.”

Jay holds up his hand defensively. “Yeah, okay. Even so, different isn’t bad. Cassandra is different. Classy and smart as hell. I like it. She’s teaching me new things.” He shrugs it off as no big deal, but I can see he’s happier and more relaxed since he started dating her.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I promise, sitting up straight and turning back to the growing file on my desk. “There has to be some fucking connection between these victims, I know it.” I shake my head, knowing there’s something I’m missing that’s right in front of my face. “What do you think?”

“I think if there was an obvious connection, we would have found it by now. We need to get creative. Think outside the box.”

I nod, liking where he’s going. “I agree. Maybe they played in a sports league together or went to the same summer camp as kids?”

“Bigger box. The vics are too dissimilar. If these crimes are being committed by the

same person, there has to be some kind of link. Something about these DBs that sets him off.”

I nod and the gears start churning in my head. I write out a list—church, school, business, social media, etc.—of ways our victims could be linked that might not show up on a regular background search.

“I get what you’re saying. There’s no obvious connection. They’re all different ages, so high school or college might not be a link, and they all have different occupations. I’ll keep freewriting this list and see if I can come up with anything outside the big box.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jay says, and I’m glad to have his approval.

We both turn back to our desks, facing one another, to focus on brainstorming ways our victims could have possibly known each other. “Wish me luck,” I groan. “I’m hitting up social media.”

Jay laughs. “Sucker. Have fun with that.”

I give Jay a one-finger salute and dig into the lives of our victims to see if they intersected and, if so, where. Scrolling through the profiles of Connor Donovan and Tristan Dupont, I look to see if they were part of the same organizations or attended any of the same events. It’s tiresome, painstaking work, but it’s our best chance to find the killer. “Who the hell has four hundred and sixteen friends?”

Laughter erupts from the bullpen, and I realize they all heard me. “I have more than a thousand friends,” someone calls out, and more laughter erupts.

“Only a thousand? I have over fifteen hundred,” another gets out between chuckles.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Fine, you got me. I actually have a real life.” I don’t, but that’s my business. I ignore the rest of the conversation because I don’t really give a damn how many social media friends these guys have. And because my thoughts—inevitably—turn back to Damien.

I can’t wrap my mind around his motives for wanting to date me. Sure, I clean up well when I try. I’m not hideous. I keep myself fit, and I’ve got decent features. But he’s a goddamn billionaire. He can have anyone he wants, someone far more exciting than me and definitely prettier. So why the hell does he want me ?

Does he though? My inner bitch speaks up, asking the question that’s been skulking around the edges of my thoughts ever since Damien fingered me to another mind-blowing orgasm on my doorstep. I suppress a shiver at the memory and force myself to focus on finding a link between the victims. Work mode. Not Damien mode.

Finally, my cop mind settles on the facts. He wanted me—emphasis on the past tense—on the night of the ball, and he had me. Multiple times, in multiple ways. And it was truly...uhm... orgasmic .

Following the playbook of most men, I’ll probably never hear from him again. He’ll be on to something younger and prettier, possibly more flexible, by this weekend.

Story of my fucking life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Damien

I hear footsteps above me and a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. I've been waiting half an hour for Nolan to come home, lurking in the shadows of his basement like a predator stalking its prey.

His daily routine never varies. Wake up at six, go to work as a graphic artist for a small media company until five, then hang out with friends until he steps into his home gym at seven-fifteen.

I remember every detail, not by choice but by necessity. Each piece of information is a weapon in my arsenal, a tool to get closer to my target. I've studied Nolan for weeks, learning his habits, his weaknesses, the chinks in his armor. And now, as I hear him moving around above me, oblivious to the danger that awaits, a rush of adrenaline surges through my veins.

But patience is key. One wrong move and all my careful planning could be for nothing. So, I wait, my mind sharp and focused on the task at hand.

Nolan thinks he's safe in his little suburban bubble, but he has no idea what a monster yours truly really is.

The footsteps grow louder and closer. I hear the creak of the door and the soft thud of Nolan's feet on the stairs. My heart races with excitement, but my hands are steady.

His brown eyes go wide with shock at his first sight of me, and he takes a step back, toppling over one of his many weight benches. “Who the fuck are you?”

I push off the wall, a slight smile playing on my lips. “I am your worst fucking nightmare, Nolan Petrovic.”

He scoffs, taking another step forward. “I don’t know who you think you are, but you picked the wrong house to rob, asshole.”

In one swift motion, I unsheathe my blade. Nolan’s body stiffens, his eyes growing large as he realizes I mean business.

“I’m not here to rob you,” I say, spinning the blade between my fingers. “You’re all I want.”

Nolan swallows hard, a bead of sweat trickling down his temple. He steps back, glancing around the room for something. “Look, man, I don’t want any trouble. Just take what you want and go.”

“Nope.” I chuckle darkly, advancing slowly. “You don’t get it, do you? The only thing I want is to watch the life drain from your eyes.”

Nolan lunges for a nearby dumbbell, and my blade slices across his outstretched arm. He cries out in pain and stumbles back, clutching the bleeding gash. Sometimes, I wish I didn’t love this so much. A bullet in the head is so much easier. But this is more fun.

“My wife—” he begins but I interrupt.

“Your wife is out of town visiting her sister. No doubt a precursor to divorce.” I nod when his eyes get wide to let him know that I know everything. All the little

insignificant details of his life are mine.

“Ah, ah, ah,” I tut, waving the knife. “Let’s not make this any messier than it needs to be. Now, be a good boy and sit down on that bench. We have a lot to discuss, you and I.”

His brow furrows. “Discuss what? Who are you?”

“I ask the questions.” I let a slow, chilling smile spread across my face. “Down.”

I watch as Nolan’s eyes dart to the bench near the stairs, calculating his chances. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

And then he bolts, legs pumping like a cornered rabbit. Idiot. I let him reach the top, then watch him fumble with the door handle like a drowning man clutching at straws. Petrovich doesn’t know I removed a few key components. He could get out if he’d calm down, but he doesn’t.

He returns, stomping down the stairs, fury and terror etched into his features. “What kind of sick game is this?”

“Not a game. If it was, you might have a chance of winning. But you don’t. Lie down.”

He crosses his arms defiantly. “And if I don’t?”

This time, my smile is genuine. “Then you’ll find out just how creative I can get.”

He tries to stare me down, relying on his gym physique to intimidate me. Doesn’t work. When it sinks in there’s no escape, his shoulders sag as he drops onto the incline bench. “Why are you doing this? What do you want?”

“I ask the questions.” I reach into my backpack and pull out a roll of water-soluble tape, waving it in front of his face to add a dash of dramatic flair. “But since you mention it, there’s something I’m curious about.” Slowly, I unroll a long strip of tape, watching the flash of fear ignite in his eyes.

“Wait! What’s the tape for?” He inches back on the bench.

“You, of course.” With surgical precision, I slice his tank top from hem to collar, exposing his chest. Pressing a hand against his sternum to steady him, I wrap the tape around him haphazardly but securely. “Much better. Now tell me, Nolan, do you still like fucking women and girls against their will? Is that why your wife is at her sister’s house? Did she find out you’re a shit bag?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” A cocky smirk twists his lips. “I don’t need to force anyone. I get plenty of pussy. Who the fuck are you?”

“But that wasn’t always the case, was it?”

“No idea what you mean. Did I fuck your girl? Is that it?”

I smile at his false bravado, his belief this is mere revenge. He’s not entirely wrong, but there’s no tomorrow for him. “In a sense, yes.”

He laughs like the idiot he is. “Forget it, man. These hoes ain’t worth all this. Move on and find another one.”

“No, I don’t think I will.” Pressing the blade tip into his shoulder, I apply the smallest amount of pressure. “Did you know the slower the knife goes in, the worse it hurts?”

His chest heaves, a trickle of blood running down his shoulder. “Hey man! What the fuck?”

“Do you get off on it? Pinning women down, forcing yourself inside them? Is that your thing?”

“I’m into whatever she’s into.”

“Is that why your wife left? Because you’re a sick rapist fuck?”

Outrage flashes in his eyes. “I’ve never raped anyone!”

“Never?” I slide the knife into his flesh again. “Not once have you fucked an unwilling woman?” I pull the blade out and force it back into the muscle of his shoulder, and he screams. “Be honest, Nolan.”

Our gazes lock for a moment. Recognition dawns in his eyes, but he lifts his chin defiantly. “Never,” he pants.

“Okay.” I jab the blade into his sternum, pushing deep and fast before dragging it down to his navel. “Let’s try again. This time, be truthful.”

Agonizing screams echo off the walls, the metal weights amplifying his suffering. Nolan is breathing heavier now, alternating between shallow breaths and deep ones, unsure which is the best way to save his life or at the very least, stop the pain. “Fuck!”

Yanking out the knife, I savor his tortured grunts. “Never?”

“Look, whatever I did, I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry...” Tears stream down his face, fear and pain intermingling.

“Answer me, Nolan.”

“No,” he pleads. “Stop. Please stop. I don’t want to die.”

Digging the blade back into his chest wound, I rip through his navel. “Still lying.”

“No, I’m not.” Nolan starts to gurgle, blood spilling from his mouth. “It was the others...please...”

“Then surely you recall Hope House. We lived there together for years.” I watch the realization click into place. Now, he remembers. He knows who I am. Pulling out the blade, I wipe it across his chest. “You really fucked up, Nolan.”

Not waiting for a response, I raise the knife overhead and plunge it into his chest, carving down to his pelvis. “You see, Nolan, there is no forgetting. No forgiving.”

His body slackens as I withdraw the blade.

“You had years of freedom. A life. Love. A career. You had it all. It ends tonight.” I slash from kidney to kidney, slicing through his pancreas. The gush of blood and viscera brings immense satisfaction; his gurgling quiets the monster inside me a bit.

Leaning in close so he’s staring into my eyes, I fight the urge to grin. I want his last memory to be my face, but I think it’s too late. “I gave you so many chances to be honest. A chance to make amends. You shouldn’t have lied, Nolan. You did this to yourself.”

Gasping, he spits more blood, red pooling beneath him, painting the floor with the evidence of his demise. His eyes finally close, accepting the inevitable.

“I’m showing you far more mercy than you gave her.” My voice is devoid of emotion, cold and unyielding as I stab out his eyes and stuff them in his mouth. He deserves none of my empathy.

And all of hell's wrath.

One less scumbag in the world. I look at his body, intestines spilling onto the bloody floor, a grotesque display of his sins. His death came quicker than he deserved, but he's dead.

Another name crossed off The List.

Good luck, Frankie. Let's see what you make of this.

The tape dissolves as I meticulously wipe every surface, leaving not a single trace of my presence. Each swipe of the cloth is methodical, precise. A spotless crime scene will stump forensics, but that's just child's play.

Fixing the door, I ensure it looks untouched, wiping the knobs until they gleam.

Exiting through the side door, I hop the back fence, landing in a CCTV-free alley, courtesy of my tech know how. My movements are swift and silent, just a shadow slipping through the night.

When I get home, I shower with a smile on my face, the hot water washing away the day's sins. I think about Francesca, her sharp mind working overtime as she tries to piece together this puzzle. Oh, the field day she'll have trying to figure this one out.

Maybe I'll fuck her again before she finds him.

After my shower, I sit in my easy chair and watch Francesca concentrating on crime scene photos in her kitchen.

She's thinking about me.

And she doesn't even know it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Frankie

“You ready for this?” Jay’s tone is somber, probably because of the wife’s tears that have a way of sticking with you long after the disgusting images of the vic’s body fade from memory.

“Probably not,” I grumble, making my way to the cheerful blue front door. “But we’re here.” I nod toward the door like it’s mocking us. “You?”

“Fuck no,” he growls and motions for me to go first. Typical Jay.

I let out a breath as I step inside the home. A few officers stand sentry near the exits to protect the crime scene until the forensics team arrives. I offer a grim smile as we head toward the back of the house.

“The side exit near Johnston is the key. Sneaky way in and out without being spotted,” I mutter.

Jay scoffs. “There are forty thousand cameras in this city, plus tens of thousands more of those doorbell cameras and other home surveillance systems. There’s no way the perp got in and out without being seen.”

“You hope,” I say, looking at the staircase leading to the split level basement. Feels claustrophobic already. “Not much room to maneuver down here.” The room is only about eight feet high and full of gym equipment.

“Don’t need a lot of space to yank out someone’s guts,” Jay grumbles as we approach the body on the incline bench, a five-foot blood stain surrounding it like a fucking rug. “What the fuck?” he sighs, running his hand through his hair.

I pull on some gloves while examining the body from head to toe, noting the similarities to our other victims before giving my first thoughts. First, the disembowelment. It points to the same killer, but not quite. “The cuts are different this time.” I point to the incision where the navel used to be. “He cut his belly button out.”

Jay leans in, carefully examining the cut. “That’s fucked up. It’s like he did it to cause more pain.” He looks up at me, a question in his eyes. “You still think this is your guy?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not my guy. But it could be a copycat. Or he’s changing his M.O. again just to fuck with us.” My gut is telling me that this isn’t a copycat, that this guy is fucking with us. I lean forward to get a better look at the body.

Jay’s gaze shifts to the glue around the mouth. “He likes glue.”

I nod, but nothing makes sense. “Eyes are closed, too.” I lift the eyelid, nothing but an empty socket. “No eyeball.” The other eye, same fate. “Both gone.”

“That’s new,” Jay says with a bit too much glee.

I glare at him.

“What? It’s just a nice twist. Something new. Maybe you and Novak can figure out what the fuck it means.”

I scribble a note about the missing eyes for later and turn my attention back to the

body. “Do you think this is the same guy?”

“I’m leaning toward it. Too many similarities to cut him out completely.”

That’s what I’m thinking, too. “It’s weird that the killer did three back-to-back kills and then took a few weeks off for this one. It’s like he was in a frenzy and then calmed down. Weird, right?”

Jay and I walk back up the short stairs to share notes when the forensics guys arrive. I spot Nate and answer his welcoming smile with a professional nod and get back to dissecting the killer’s profile with Jay. I don’t need my ex messing with my head right now.

“Maybe something came up at his day job? Maybe it’s just a copycat with a sadistic streak? Or maybe he met someone who makes him not want to be a fucked-in-the-head murderer.” Jay shrugs. “It could be anything, Frankie. Focus.”

He’s right. I push what I know of the earlier kills to the back of my mind and focus only on this one. “This body has been here for at least a few days. Why did the wife only find it this evening? It’s after eleven at night. Isn’t that odd?”

“Nope. They were fighting, and she’s been with her sister for the past few weeks. She came back because he stopped answering her calls.” Jay shakes his head. “She feels guilty as fuck.”

“Too guilty?”

“Nah. Flight records confirm she was in Colorado until a few hours ago.”

My shoulders fall because, so far, we have nothing. Again. “Hopefully, fingerprints will give us something.”

Nate bounds up the stairs and joins us. “Don’t count on it,” he says with a slow shake of his head. “I just spoke to Vera and this whole area is clean.”

My brows knit into a frown. “No fingerprints?” Shit, killer’s being extra careful, which isn’t a good thing for us.

“No,” Nate sighs. “No fingerprints at all. The whole place is completely clean.”

Jay says, “Fast work,” just as I open my mouth to ask the next obvious question, but Nate cuts me off.

“None on the side door either, which probably indicates that’s how he got in and out.” He flashes that charming smile, probably thinking of all the times we did this same dance at a crime scene and answers a question before I even ask it.

And that pisses me off.

Jay takes a step closer. “What makes you say that, Robinson?”

“Because everything got wiped clean. We’re getting the wife’s prints and DNA to rule her out, but Vera is one of the best agents on fingerprints, and she can’t find anything.” Nate turns his gaze back to me, a little softer and more patient. “There’s also a substance on the forehead and the chest. Could be the perps, but I won’t know until we get it back to the lab.”

“Really? That’s new.” Maybe this killer isn’t the same guy. First time he’s left biologicals behind.

“Who knows?” Jay scribbles on his notepad. “Usually, he dumps the bodies in public places, so for all we know, he’s been blowing his load all over the crime scenes.”

“Good point.” I turn back to Nate. “Rush results on those fluids?”

“Yeah, when I get done here. But it doesn’t look like semen. I’d be surprised if it is.”

“Okay.” This is too weird. But it might be a lead. “It’s too messy, disorganized. Not his style.”

“The scene?”

“Everything. The scene, biologicals, the mess.” It gnaws at me. Now, I’m second guessing if this is the same killer, or just another murder on the books?

Maybe I’m just upset that I haven’t heard from the gorgeous billionaire who rocked my world since he sent me flowers, my sarcastic subconscious adds. Truth is his absence nags at me. I haven’t heard from him since the flowers a few days ago.

Why did I call him? I’m sure the stupid voice mail I left made me seem like a fan girl, not a grown woman.

I berate myself again. A quick, no-strings night, I tell myself, and then I reach out. Foolish. The ideal one-night stand is satisfaction without strings. The mildly hurt, pissed off woman in me says fuck him and the horse he rode in on because I have enough on my plate with a serial killer along with all the other crimes that take place every day. I don’t need to focus on Damien or his motives.

But, it still kinda hurts.

I shake those thoughts free and let out a cleansing breath. The only man I’m interested in right now is the one leaving all these bodies around my city.

“Hey, Frankie, are you all right?” Nate reaches out to grip my shoulder.

“Fine,” I snap, unnecessarily. “Just thinking about a few things,” I add, softening my earlier tone. “Thanks for rushing those fluids.”

I walk away, grounding myself in the task at hand—not the handsome billionaire.

My thoughts shift back to Nolan Petrovic.

The psycho disemboweled this man in his own home. His story demands my full attention.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Frankie

“It’s a bust on Petrovic,” I growl, pushing my chair back hard enough to almost tip it over. I feel the tension in my neck spasm as I roll my shoulders, trying to shake off the tightness settling in. “These guys are like fucking ghosts. There has to be a connection.” There’s always one—some thread that weaves their lives together, even if it’s as mundane as a shared gym membership or the fact that they’re all cheating on their spouses.

Jay slams his pencil down, the sound echoing through the cluttered office. It’s the telltale sign that he’s reached his limit, too. “Yeah, I was hoping for more on those biologicals left on his forehead. Vitreous fluid,” he mutters, shaking his head. “This guy’s a monster.”

“Tell me about it,” I reply, the words coming out sharper than intended. “Squashing someone’s eyeballs is peak demented. How far gone do you have to be?”

Jay exhales, a weary sound filled with disgust. “Maybe he’s only hunting men? Just an opportunistic killer like Gacy, picking off what’s available.”

“Yeah, but Gacy still targeted young boys. This guy? He’s all over the place—different ages, different backgrounds—just a bunch of men.”

“Then that’s your answer,” he says, frustration creeping into his voice. “Maybe he’s just a scrawny loser wishing he could be strong and virile like these guys. They’re fit

and attractive enough, right?”

I stare at the wall, my mind racing. It's easy to throw theory after theory, but it all feels like grasping at straws in the dark. This isn't just about profiling; it's about stopping a monster before he claims another life.

It's a good point, and I nod my agreement at Jay's explanation, but it doesn't feel right. As a detective, I rely on the evidence to make arrests and ultimately get convictions, but to get there, I rely heavily on my gut. Any cop who denies that is lying—or a terrible cop.

“You don't like it.”

“No, I don't. The crime is too violent, too personal. He knows these men, or they're proxies for who he really wants to kill.” It's the only thing that fits.

Jay pushes away from the desk and stands up, shaking his head while sending me a half-hearted glare. A surge of concern rises in me when I see the haggard look in his eye and the dark pools of fatigue circling his cheekbones. I'm sure my face mirrors his fatigue. “That's enough for tonight,” he says with a yawn and adds, “We're not doing anyone any favors working ourselves to the bone. Let's get out of here and get some sleep.”

“Maybe you're right,” I agree. “I need to get out of here and get some sleep, or else I'm going to go crazier than I already am.”

He lets out a short laugh. “Have you been staying because of me? You know you don't have to keep my hours, Frankie.”

“We're partners,” I grunt, as if that's the only response needed.

“I know, but you have some autonomy, you know. If you need to knock off early, do that. I see your dedication to the job.”

His words mean the world to me. Especially after what happened to my dad. Yeah, I want to nail the fucker terrorizing these men, but I also want to end my career with a rep like Jay’s as one of the best ever to wear the badge.

And if my dad is looking down, I want him to swell with pride that his little girl is following in his footsteps. That and only that would make all this hard work worthwhile.

Jay grabs his jacket from the back of his chair. “Night, Frankie.”

I turn out the lamp on my desk. “Night. Plans tonight?”

He glances down at his watch. “Fingers crossed. Maybe I can convince Cassandra to have dinner with me if it’s not too late.” His eyebrows dance with excitement, and I smile.

Jay’s getting more action than me. Hell, he’s getting all the action while I’ve just been ghosted by a man who gave me the best sex of my life. “Have some fun for me too, would ya?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he says, giving me a two-fingered salute.

Jay and I leave the precinct together, parting when I head for my car. I check the back seat and my surroundings before slipping inside, then let out a deep breath and head home. My thoughts wander back to Damien, which pisses me off.

“Fuck him,” I say out loud just to drive the point home to myself. He’s not worth thinking about because, clearly, he’s not thinking about me, which is fine.

He never made me any promises except for a good time.

And I did have a good time. A really good time.

It stings, that's all. I don't need Damien Wolfe or any other man for that matter. They are a luxury, not a necessity.

I arrive at my house and frown at an unfamiliar silver Audi parked in my driveway. The neighbors would ask before committing such an offense, and I brace myself for whoever the hell it is as I step out of my sedan and flip the snap on my holster—just in case.

The Audi door opens, and a tall figure steps out. Even though darkness conceals his identity, I know those broad shoulders and long legs. Even so, I aim my gun at the person. "Stop right there and identify yourself."

The man is unflappable, that's for sure. He doesn't freeze or gasp or show any other signs of shock. He stays relaxed as he turns to face me. "It's me, Francesca. Damien."

As if I don't know. "What are you doing here?" My voice comes out softer than I intended, betraying my mixed emotions.

His shoulders fall. "I had to rush off for a few days, Francesca, but I'm back now."

"Without a word?" I arch an eyebrow, trying to keep my demeanor cool even as my heart skips a beat.

He nods. "It was sudden. I didn't have time to explain. I'm sorry."

"I left you a message. Did you get it?"

He says, “I did. And that’s why I’m here.”

“Oh, so you think you can ignore me for days and then just show up like it’s nothing?” Shit. Now I sound like a psycho.

He gives me that killer smile and shoves his hands in his pockets. “You got it, Frankie.”

His easy agreement throws me off. I expected him to put up more resistance, but he just smiles like he’s amused, making it hard to stay mad.

“Don’t charm your way out of this, Damien. You disappeared, and now you’re here. Why?”

“To see you.” He takes a few steps forward, his eyes searching mine. “And to make it up to you. I’m here to cook dinner and spend some time together.”

A flutter of excitement stirs inside me despite my best efforts to stay guarded. “Dinner? You better hope you’re as good in the kitchen as you think you are.”

He turns his back to me, popping the trunk of his car.

“You got a body in there?” The playfulness in my voice is clear. “Sorry to tell you, Damien, but I’d have to arrest you.”

He turns to me with a fake pout. “You would? After all we’ve shared?”

“In a heartbeat,” I reply, biting back a smile. “Badge before...whatever this is between us.”

He retrieves two canvas bags from the trunk. “Good thing it’s just dinner ingredients,

then. I'm cooking for you tonight if you'll let me."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "You cook? Or did your private chef pack some gourmet TV dinners with reheating instructions?"

Damien's laugh is rich and genuine, the sound wrapping around me like a warm embrace. "I'll have you know I'm quite skilled in the kitchen. Among other things," he adds with a wink.

Heat rises to my cheeks, but I refuse to let him see how much he affects me. "Big talk, Wolfe. You'll have to prove it."

"With pleasure," he purrs, his voice low and promising. "Though if I accidentally poison you, feel free to sue me. I hear I'm good for it."

I chuckle, some of the tension between us dissipating. "You've got yourself a deal. Either I get a great meal or a fat lawsuit. Seems like a win-win to me."

His eyes soften, a touch of vulnerability showing through his confident exterior. "So, does this mean I'm forgiven?"

I turn toward the house, allowing myself a small smile he can't see. "That depends on how good you are with your... cooking skills. I have high standards, you know."

I'm also curious to see what else he'll do with those magic hands.

Maybe a night of hot monkey sex is just what I need.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Damien

“That smells so good already. What is it?” The moan Frankie lets out as she re-enters the kitchen almost does me in. Then I see her in leggings and an oversized t-shirt, looking relaxed. Almost happy. Because of me. “Damien, is everything okay?”

I clear my mind of my dirty thoughts and flash my most charming smile, letting my gaze linger on her body. “Everything’s great. Even better now that I get to see you like this. Relaxed. Beautiful.”

She rolls her eyes, but the blush on her cheeks tells me she appreciates the compliment. “So, what’s making my house smell so amazing?”

“It’s nice to meet a woman who isn’t afraid to show her love of food.”

“Oh, believe me, I love food. A lot. Now, tell me what you’ve got cooking.”

I cover the pot and reach for the bottle of Pinot Noir that I opened on the counter to breathe. “Coq au vin.”

She nods approvingly. “Yum. I had it at this French place in Silver Lake. Think you’re as good as they are?”

“Absolutely.” I hold up my glass with a grin. “Let’s toast to new friends getting to know each other better. Much better,” I add, because that’s my plan for tonight.

Getting to know more about the beautiful detective.

She cocks a brow. “Are we friends now?”

I nod. “To be honest, I don’t know how any of my other friends taste, but I think we can be friends. Can’t we?”

Her gaze is sharp, but there’s humor in her eyes. “That depends on your definition of a friend.”

I smirk, liking where this is going. “Ask me anything,” I tease as she slides that beautiful ass onto a seat at the counter, dangling one long leg seductively. “Go on. Anything.”

She takes a sip of wine, savoring it with a moan that I feel in my cock. “Okay. Do your parents love to brag about their successful son?”

My lips curve into a sad smile. “My parents died when I was young. They’ve been gone for quite some time.”

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, Damien. I didn’t know.”

My smile turns genuine. “It’s refreshing that you didn’t. Most people think they know everything about me.”

“Everything?”

I nod. “So, is it safe to say you haven’t googled me?”

“Well,” she says, tossing her head from side to side, “I am a detective. But I’m not into celebrities, except Gil Grissom. He makes law enforcement look good. Really

good.” She laughs at my shocked expression. “What? He does! And he’s smart.”

Seeing this side of her endears her to me. It’s a stark contrast to her usual composed demeanor. It also keeps her off the topic of my childhood. Her eyes light up as she talks about the fictional CSI character, and I’m captivated by her genuine excitement.

“Gil Grissom, huh?” I say, leaning across the marble island to peer into her eyes. “I never pegged you for an old crime show enthusiast. Though I suppose it makes sense, given your line of work.”

Frankie's cheeks redden, but she doesn't back down. “What can I say? Old crime shows are my guilty pleasure. And Grissom.....well, he’s in a league of his own.”

I put this info in the back of my mind. The little details, the unexpected quirks, make Frankie all the more intriguing to me. I wonder what other surprises she has in store.

“Well, detective,” I say, a playful glint in my eye, “I may not be Gil Grissom, but I hope I can make real-life company look good too. Really good.”

She laughs, the sound warms something inside me. “You’re doing all right so far, Damien. But don’t let it go to your head.”

I feign innocence. “This head?” I say, pointing at myself.

“Yes.” She giggles. “That head. So, where did you come from? Are you an L.A. native?”

“Sure am. You?”

“Same,” she nods, taking another sip. “My parents died when I was young, too, so it’s just me now. Well, and Jay, who’s practically family.”

I consider telling her about Olivia but decide against it. Not yet. “I’m sorry about your parents. That must have been hard.”

She nods. “Dad was killed trying to take down a criminal organization.” Frankie looks away, telling me her story as though talking to herself. “Mom couldn’t handle the grief. She never got over it.” She finishes her wine. “So...she...uhm...committed suicide.”

“I am so sorry, Francesca,” My grief for Francesca is overshadowed by the fact that she’s giving me parts of herself she keeps hidden. She’s trusting me, which plays into my hands. “Is that why you became a cop? Your father?”

She smiles, holding out her glass for a refill. “No. It was Jay. The way he came in that night like a charging bull was better than anything I’d ever seen. I wanted to feel that strong and powerful.”

Interesting. “And do you?”

She nods. “Most days, sure. The job is tough, and the good guys don’t always win.”

They won’t win in my case either, but that’s an issue for later. “But it feels good when you get the bad guy, right?”

Frankie shrugs. “Good? It feels good to get them off the street, but it feels great telling the victims’ families that the guy who tore their life apart can’t hurt anyone else.” She smiles wide enough to convince me of her sincerity. “That makes me feel as if I’m making an actual difference instead of just taking out the trash.”

She licks her lips, making me long to stick my tongue in her mouth, but I ignore my rising erection. “My father used to say the world needs garbage collectors. They keep everything smelling like roses.” I can’t believe that memory surfaces right at this

moment.

“Been a while since you’ve thought about your folks?” she asks nodding, a sympathetic smile on her face.

“Yeah,” I admit, letting out a shaky sigh. “A long while.”

The mood lightens with Frankie’s laughter while I add the half-cooked chicken to the pot. “Now I get why you’re single. We’re terrible at this.”

I turn with a grin. “Terrible at what?”

“Fun and flirty date banter, obviously.” Her amusement is at odds with her words. “Favorite color?”

“Red. You?”

With her finger on her chin, she bats her eyes flirtatiously before saying, “Purple. Favorite food?”

I don’t have a favorite, but that’s not a normal get-to-know-you answer. “Uh...Italian.”

“Favorite band?” She grins, playing along.

“Don’t have one.”

She rolls her eyes with fake exasperation. “Hey, you have to pick at least one.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Uhm, Queen.”

“Freddie Mercury? Really? Me, too. I loved listening to them when I was a kid.”

That brings back a memory I don't care to discuss. “When I was a teenager, I was really into rock music and that was the last time I was passionate about music, so Queen it is.”

Her brown eyes widen in surprise and then a shocked laughter burst from her. “You were totally one of those grunge-y rock boys, weren't you?”

“I plead the fifth.”

Her laughter gets louder at my response and it's such a welcome sound that I don't care it's at my expense. “I'll bet you were adorable. Was black eyeliner involved?” Her eyes go wider as her excitement grows. “Please tell me black eyeliner was involved!”

This is a stark contrast to the Frankie who's been tired and moping around her house for the past week. It's nice to know that she feels my absence as greatly as I feel hers. “There may have been eyeliner involved for a brief period, but that's all you get.”

“Thanks. I can picture it clearly,” she says, closing her eyes with a sweet smile. “Please tell me that's done because I can't take the aroma of that chicken anymore!”

I lift the lid to poke a thigh and declare, “It's done.” We work together for the next few minutes to get dinner on the table. It feels domestic, as if this isn't the first time we've done this.

She views the romantic setting, and her eyes widen. “Wow, this is impressive, Damien.”

“Right?” I pull her chair out, and her smile grows brighter. “I'm kind of an

impressive guy.”

“Modest, too,” she adds with a laugh.

“Modesty is overrated. If I ask you about your detective skills, I’d hope you’d say you’re good, possibly one of the best. Because it’s true.” The smile she gives me is playful, and I know my words are getting me closer to where I need to be with this woman.

Instead of answering, she digs into the coq au vin and mashed potatoes. She spears a glazed carrot, eating with a softly erotic moan. “Damien, this is seriously good.” She lets out another moan and her eyes roll back in her head. “Damn.”

I laugh. “So, I’m forgiven?”

She freezes with a forkful of mashed potatoes halfway to her mouth. “Oh, I see,” she says, her brown eyes dancing with amusement. “Is this your sex meal?”

I laugh. “My what ?”

“Sex meal,” she says, grinning. “The meal you cook when it’s time to get naked.”

She’s curious about me. Another good sign. “I don’t have a sex meal, Francesca.”

Her lips pull together into a pout, her brows lifting in disbelief. “Oh, come on. You’ve never done it?”

“No,” I answer honestly. “Because I don’t cook for women. Until today.”

“What? Why the hell not? You’re an incredible cook.”

I shrug. "It gives women the wrong impression." It's a lesson I learned the hard way shortly after making my first billion, but well before that, if I'm being honest. "I just don't need the headache."

"And what impression should I glean from this delicious meal?" she asks before taking another bite. "Because damn, I can see why you don't do this for every woman you date."

My smile widens, genuinely amused. Her words send a rush of warmth through me I haven't felt in forever. "You should glean that I want to know more about you. What you like, what you love. What pisses you off. All of it."

"So, you want my secrets?" she questions playfully.

"And if I do?" This is the moment of truth, whether she'll trust me or keep me at arm's length.

"If you do, this is a good start. Ignoring me for a week, however, is not."

"Message received." Even though I know where this is headed, I like her. She's more intriguing than any other woman I've known. There's strength and confidence about her that pulls me in like a magnet. It's why I'm here tonight. "It wasn't my intention to ignore you," I lie easily.

She waves me off. "Consider that your one pass, Damien. Anymore, and I'm out, no matter how charming you are." She points her fork at me to make sure I understand she's serious.

"Got it, but you definitely underestimate just how charming I can be." I give her a slow and seductive smile, and the way her eyes glaze over is like a fucking aphrodisiac I feel all the way down to my bones.

Francesca sits back, staring at me with her head tilting to the side and a slow smile forming on her lips. “Believe me, it’s not possible. It’s coming out of your pores. It wafts off you like a second skin.”

Her words make me laugh, and that shocks me more than anything. “I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.”

“Welcome to the club.”

I lick my lips and lean forward in full seduction mode. “Any club you’re in is one I want to belong to, Frankie.”

She laughs, but her eyes are full of heat. “See, too much fucking charm. It really is ridiculous, you know.” Her smile is playful, and she’s not put off by my charm, though she’s not completely sold on it either.

“It is ridiculous,” I agree. “But you like it, anyway.”

“Maybe,” she replies before pushing her plate away. “Or maybe I’m just too enchanted by your handsome face to be objective.”

I shrug. “Works for me either way.”

“Now that’s a lie.” She calls me out, but I don’t mind. “You know you’re rich and gorgeous and smart and charming,” she begins, rolling her eyes as if extolling my virtues annoys her. “But you want someone to want you because you’re smart and funny, probably even kind. You want someone to see you, the real you, and want you despite the rest.”

“Then I guess you better get to know me. The real me.”

I wonder if she'll like what she sees when that moment arrives.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:50 am

Damien

Watching Frankie is my newest obsession. Her allure isn't just about looks or smarts. She's an enigma, a puzzle I need to solve with each stolen glance.

It's a dangerous thing, this attachment. Olivia is the only one I should care about, but the pull to Frankie is powerful. Every moment we're apart, I feel it. Her taste fades, and a physical ache takes its place. It's alarming. Dangerous, actually.

But first, I need to break her, twist her up so she doubts everything she knows—her skills, her case, maybe even herself.

I have a job to do, several jobs, in fact. I have names to cross off The List, and a plan that will—fingers crossed—bring my sister back to the land of the living. Until I meet those goals, nothing and no one else matters.

Frankie will be mine in every way, and someday, she'll know that the monster she's hunting is the man who makes her feel like no other man ever has.

I smile, thinking about the moment she'll realize we are one and the same. It will be too late, of course, but I appreciate that moment of realization more with every kill.

Like an addict, I watch her from the shadows when she doesn't know I'm around. She hunts the monster and wants to lock him up. But the man ? She wants him, too. Desires him in a way even she can't explain. She wants us both, and knowing it only enhances this strange, magnetic pull I feel toward her.

I'd feel giddy if I were capable of such an emotion.

She's tired and angry, but she's also doubting herself. I know the extra time I took at the crime scene is making her doubt everything she knows about the monster she's hunting. The lack of a dump site and the different method of evisceration is likely driving her crazy.

It's satisfying but it's not enough. I need to do more, I need to push Frankie a little more, which is why I make a stop at the best florist in downtown Los Angeles.

"Welcome to Bloom! How may I assist you today?" The woman behind the counter is exactly what a florist should look like, short and round with soft silver curls and a friendly smile.

I offer a friendly smile in return, careful to leave a lasting impression. "I'd like two dozen long-stem roses."

Her blue gaze lights up. "Lucky lady. Red?"

I think about it and shake my head. "Red, pink and white. Make it beautiful. And feminine."

With a bit of pep in her step, the florist disappears for a few minutes before returning with a tall crystal vase full of colorful roses and a baby's breath for extra decoration. "I think this is what you're looking for?"

I take it in and a slow smile spreads. "Yes, this is perfect. Thank you."

"My pleasure. You'll want to leave a note, of course," she says and slides a small card across the counter.

I scribble a message on the card and seal the tiny envelope with a smile, paying for

the delivery in cash.

“Make sure you deliver these at this exact time to Detective DeMarco.”

The florist flashes a bright smile. “And they men don’t know how to be romantic anymore. I’ll handle this myself, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Two hours, one meeting and one excruciating conference call later, I’m sitting in my home office when Frankie finally arrives home.

She’s barely standing up, unsteady on her feet as she carries the crystal vase that holds the long-stem roses. She’s smiling through her exhaustion as she buries her head into the perfumed bouquet before opening her door, something I imagine she’s done a few times since they arrived at the precinct.

The sound of a car pulling up grabs her attention. My heart quickens. Through another camera, I see Nate Robinson stepping out, along with two other people. This should be interesting.

Frankie peers through the door peephole, and her brow furrows as she recognizes them.

She swings the door open. “Nate, what’s going on? Jay? Why are you here? I just left,” she says, her voice heavy with exhaustion.

“Frankie, we need to talk. This is important.” Nate’s tone is serious.

She lets them in, and I switch my view to a wider angle, making sure I don’t miss anything. “What’s going on?”

Jay steps closer, crossing his arms. “We received a report about someone hanging around your place last night. It might be nothing, but with the serial killer on the loose, we’re here to check things out.”

Frankie blinks a few times. “I had a dinner date a few nights ago, but I haven’t seen anyone hanging out around here. I was at work until about nine last night. Who called it in?”

“Anonymous caller,” Jay replies.

“Fuck,” she sighs, running a hand through her hair. “So, what now?”

A female officer steps up, holding a device. “We’re going to perform a comprehensive scan of your home, Frankie,” she explains. “We’ll check for any unauthorized surveillance gear, hidden cameras, and any other tampering. You can’t be too careful these days. If someone’s got their eyes on you, they might have planted something—could be a bomb, incendiary device, a bug or anything else that could jeopardize your safety. We want to make sure your home is secure.”

Frankie’s eyes widen, but she nods, stepping aside. “Hey, Sarah. Do what you have to do. I won’t let someone fuck with me in my own home.”

My heart is practically beating out of my chest. Fuck. This wasn’t part of the plan. I watch the cop, Sarah, closely. I know exactly what she’s going to find.

After some time, Sarah’s device beeps. She pulls out a tiny, sophisticated camera from an inconspicuous spot on the bookshelf and holds it up. “Nate, I got something. It’s a camera. There could be more.”

Frankie’s face pales as she backs away from the lens. “What do you mean a camera? How is that possible?”

Nate's face hardens. "It means someone's been watching you, Frankie. Monitoring everything you do."

A flash of panic crosses her face. "This can't be happening...who would do something like this?"

Sarah and Nate share a look that makes my skin crawl. "Whoever it is," Sarah says, "they've got serious resources and technical know-how."

"Fuck." Frankie slumps into a chair, head in her hands. "I can't believe this..."

Nate lays a hand on her shoulder. "Frankie, we'll find out who did this, I promise. But for now, you need to be somewhere safe. Somewhere they wouldn't expect. How about my place?"

"No way, Nate. Not in a million years," Frankie says, spitting the words out.

Jay steps in, sounding like a concerned father. "Frankie, you can stay at my place. I've got that extra room."

Is he serious? Absolutely not. She's not staying with any of them! I grab my phone and tap the screen.

"Hello, Damien?" she answers, her voice trembling. "Uhm, thanks for the flowers, they're beautiful."

"Are you okay? You sound upset—what's going on?"

Her voice softens. "Oh, Damien, Jay and Nate are here. They found a camera inside my house. Someone's been spying on me..."

"God, Frankie. Do they know who it is?" I press hard on concern, and she buys it.

“No, they have to figure it out. I just feel so violated.”

I switch my tone to concern and comfort. “Well, you shouldn’t stay there,” I insist. “Come to my place. It’s secure, and you’ll be safe with me.”

Nate shakes his head, clearly eavesdropping. Frankie’s eyes dart around, and she walks down the hall. “I don’t know Damien, I mean are you sure? Just for a few days until they can secure my house?”

“Absolutely. Pack a few things. I’ll be there within the hour. We’ll sort this out together.”

“Thank you, Damien. But...”

“No buts. I’ll be there soon. Don’t worry, Frankie. You can stay at my penthouse. I’ll crash at the office.”

“Thank you. See you soon.”

She hangs up and walks back into the living room. “I’m going to stay with Damien for a couple of days.”

“Frankie, you barely know him!” Nate protests.

“Nate, that’s none of your business,” she shoots back.

Good girl.

“This is just the beginning,” I whisper. “You’ll be right where I want you, Francesca.”

After finishing my drink, I disconnect the cameras and surveillance. I don’t want to

be too early. After another twenty minutes, it's time to make my move. Excellent.

I pull up to her place and spot her standing outside with a small suitcase. She looks fragile and vulnerable—just the way I want her. I park and walk toward her.

“Frankie,” I call out, concern dripping from my voice. “Why are you outside?”

She looks up, her face softening at the sight of me. “I didn't want to be in there while they're looking for more cameras. Thank you for coming.”

“Of course,” I reply, taking her suitcase. “I couldn't leave you like this. Come on, let's get you to safety.”

We climb into the car, and I feel her fear. It's actually intoxicating. Sick, I know.

“Do you have any idea who could be behind this?” I ask, eyes flicking to her briefly as I drive.

She shakes her head. “I have no clue. It's terrifying to think someone's been watching me...”

“You'll be safe at my place,” I assure her, my voice steady. “Let the professionals figure it out.”

She glances at me. “Damien...thank you. I don't know what I would've done without you.”

I smile. “We'll get through this, Frankie. I promise.”

“We?” she asks.

I glance at her and put my hand on her thigh. “Yes, we.”

We drive in silence for a bit before arriving at my penthouse. I pull into the garage and park. “Let’s get you inside,” I say softly. “You’ll be safe here.”

Frankie nods, and we head into what she believes is her sanctuary. Little does she know she’s stepping right into my grasp.

Francesca slips into bed, and I turn to switch off the light.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I told you I’d sleep in my office.”

Francesca turns down the comforter and pats the bed. “No, you belong here. Stay with me. Please.”

As I sink into the bed beside Frankie, her soft breathing lulls me into a false sense of security. I turn to face her, the moonlight gently highlighting the beautiful contours of her face. She looks so peaceful, blissfully unaware of the monster lying next to her.

All of a sudden, my phone lights up. I reach for it, and the message I read sends a rush of excitement through me.

“We need to talk. It’s about Frankie. Meet me at the usual spot.”