



The Last Shadow (Shadows and Strings #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: She's digging for truth. He's burying it in lies.

I married Detective Francesca DeMarco to keep her from talking—to tie her to me before she could expose everything. A convenient arrangement wrapped in designer dresses and golden handcuffs.

She was supposed to be my enemy, but she's become my obsession. Now she's stuck in my world, in my home, in my bed—right where I want her.

Every step she takes into my darkness makes me realize she's the only one who might actually understand me. Because she's got her own dark secrets, too.

We're bound by shadows, tangled in lies, and loving a monster always comes at a price.

For the first time, I'm not sure if I'm the one pulling the strings, or if she's the puppet master.

Get ready for the explosive conclusion of the Shadows and Strings trilogy. The Last Shadow will keep you guessing until the very end. Because when love blooms in darkness, it can either save you or destroy you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Frankie

My life is ash. Everything I've built, worked for—gone. All those years, all that hard work, reduced to nothing in a single instant.

I stand in front of what used to be my home. My cute little two-story house, the place I saved for, renovated, and decorated. It's nothing now—just a charred skeleton of blackened beams against the gray sky. My chest tightens with every breath, the pain settling deep inside, and it's almost too much to bear.

Tears slide down my face, but I don't feel them. I can't feel anything right now. It's like the world is moving in slow motion, everything muted, like someone hit a switch and I'm watching it all from a distance. Numb. Lost.

A few feet away, Jay stands quietly. He's never quiet, always running his mouth or throwing out some dumb joke to lighten the mood. But not now. He knows there's no joke that can fix this, no words that can make it better.

I clench my fists at my sides, trying to keep it together, but the anger bubbles up inside me, burning hotter than the fire that took my house.

"Fuck," I whisper, the word slipping out before I can stop it. But it's not enough. I want to scream. I want to tear the whole world apart because everything I've built has been ripped away from me. "FUCK!"

And then, just like that, Damien's voice creeps into my mind. The way he snapped at me earlier. The way he stormed out, slamming the door behind him, leaving me standing there, heartbroken and alone. If Jay hadn't shown up, I'd still be sitting on the floor, sobbing in the apartment we share, wondering how it all went so wrong.

A car door slams in the distance, breaking through the haze in my mind. I look up, and Damien's rushing toward me, his face full of concern. It feels like a bad dream, watching him come closer. All I can think about is the fight. His angry words still sting like a fresh slap across my face.

"Francesca," he calls out, breathless as he reaches me. "I'm so sorry. I came as soon as I heard. Are you okay?"

A bitter laugh escapes me, sharp and humorless. "My house just burned to the ground, so no. Not really."

Damien flinches but recovers quickly, running a hand through his dark hair. "Yeah, stupid question. I just?—"

He trails off, and for a moment, I think I see genuine regret in his eyes. But it's not enough to fix this. Nothing can fix this.

"I'm sorry, Francesca. I was a total ass earlier. I shouldn't have yelled; shouldn't have left you like that. Can you forgive me?"

Forgive him? My insides twist into knots. I stare at him, my emotions swirling. Rage, hurt, confusion. I don't know what to feel. I don't know how to feel. Part of me wants to scream at him, lash out, tell him how much he hurt me. But another part—this small, broken part—just wants to crumble into his arms, to let him carry the weight of this for me.

“I don’t know, Damien.” My voice cracks, raw from crying, from the exhaustion that’s settling in. “I just...I can’t right now. My life...everything I worked for...it all just went up in flames.”

He nods. “I know. Whatever you need, my pet. Just say the word.”

I let out a slow breath, trying to find something solid to hold on to, but it’s like the ground has been ripped out from under me. I don’t know how to move forward. I don’t even know where to start.

“What I need,” I say softly, “is time. Time to figure out what the hell I’m going to do next.”

Damien doesn’t push. He just nods, his face somber. “Of course. I’m here, kitten. Whatever you need.”

I glance at the ruins of my house again, and it’s like a punch to the gut. All my hard work, my memories are gone. Just like that. Poof. Ashes. I feel as if I am free-falling, spiraling, and there is nothing to hold onto to stop the descent.

Damien’s hand slides into mine. “Come home with me, Francesca.”

My body stiffens. My mind screams at me to push him away, to tell him to go fuck himself. But I can’t. I’m tired. So fucking tired. I don’t have the energy to fight anymore. Not now. Not after this.

“Okay,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “Let’s go.”

We start walking toward his car, but Jay steps forward. “Frankie, wait.” He touches my shoulder, and the warmth of his hand is grounding.

“I know you’re going through a lot,” he says softly. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

I manage a small smile, but it’s weak, hollow. “I appreciate it, Jay. Really. We’re going to Damien’s place. It’s all I’ve got right now.”

Jay nods, his eyes full of unspoken worry. “Okay. But if you need anything, anything at all, call me. Got it?”

“Got it.” I squeeze his hand. “Thanks, Jay. For everything.”

He pulls me into a quick hug. “Anytime, partner. You know I’ve got your back.”

As Jay steps away, Damien wraps an arm around my waist, guiding me to the car. His touch is comforting. My mind screams that I shouldn’t find solace in him, not after everything that’s happened, but I can’t help it. Not now. Not after losing everything.

Before we reach the car, Fire Chief O’Malley walks up, his face grim. “Detective DeMarco, I’m sorry for your loss. We managed to get the fire under control, but there’s not much left.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, my voice shaky. “Any idea what caused it?”

He shakes his head. “Too early to say for sure, but it looks like arson. The fire started in the back. We’ll need to do a full investigation.”

My stomach churns. The Butcher. Could he have done this? Is this his twisted way of coming after me? But I can’t say it out loud. Not yet. Not without proof.

“Thanks, Chief,” I manage to say, trying to keep my voice from breaking. “Please keep me updated.”

“Of course.” He gestures to one of the firefighters standing nearby. “I’ll have someone walk you to your car. Just to be safe.”

I nod, appreciating the gesture, but knowing deep down it won’t be enough. If the Butcher is behind this, he’s watching. I can feel it. He’s out there, somewhere, waiting for his next move.

Damien opens the passenger door, his movements careful, like he’s handling something fragile. Before I climb in, I turn to him, my voice barely a whisper. “Damien, about earlier...”

He rests his hand on my shoulder, his touch gentle. “You don’t have to explain. I know things got heated, and I’m sorry. I should have been there for you.”

A wave of doubt washes over me, but I push it aside. “I don’t know, Damien. Everything’s just so confusing.”

He pulls me into his arms, his hand moving in slow, comforting circles on my back. “I know, Francesca. You’ve been through hell and back. But I’m here. I’ll always be here. You can trust me.”

I want to believe him. For a second, I let myself melt into his embrace, the comfort too tempting to resist. “I do trust you,” I whisper. “I’m sorry about earlier, too.”

He pulls back slightly, just enough to look me in the eyes. “No need to apologize. Just know I care about you more than anything. My only goal is to protect you.”

I nod, feeling some of the weight lift, but there’s still doubt gnawing at me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe those pictures weren’t what I thought. I just need to find this killer. I need it all to end.

“Let’s get you home,” Damien says softly, helping me into the car. “You need rest.”

As we drive away, I close my eyes and try to block out the chaos, but the thoughts keep coming. I’ve lost my home, my memories, and I almost lost Damien.

All because of a stranger. A faceless killer I can’t even begin to identify.

And that’s the scariest part of all.

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CHAPTER TWO

Frankie

“Frankie, you shouldn’t be here right now,” Jay says, his eyes full of concern. “Look, it’s okay to step back for a bit. You need to take care of yourself. You can’t keep pushing like this, it’s okay to take some time off.” He’s trying to protect me, but I shrug it off.

“I’m fine,” I snap, sharper than I intended. My gaze is locked on the whiteboard, filled with victims’ faces. Each one is a reminder of why I’m here, even as the fire keeps creeping into my thoughts.

“Your house just burned down, Frankie,” Jay says. “If you need to take care of things, I got this.”

I take a deep breath, slowly blowing out the frustration. “I spent all day on the phone with the insurance company,” I say. “They won’t do anything until they know if it was arson. I can’t even go over there yet.”

He just looks at me, concern written all over his face. I don’t have the time or the headspace for this right now. I take another breath, trying to get my focus back. “I need to work, Jay.”

Jay doesn’t argue, but the silence hangs between us. I glance back at him. “Are you ready to do this, or are you going to keep feeling sorry for me?”

He sighs, a hint of a smile. “All right, Frankie. I’m really sorry about your house. But let’s get to work.”

“Thanks, Jay.” I’ve thanked about fifty officers who stopped by the war room to offer their condolences on my house, all of them with a mixture of sympathy and pity in their eyes. I’m tired of hearing that shit and I need to focus on things that matter.

“We’ll probably never figure out who put the cameras in your place now, not that we were close to figuring it out, anyway.”

He’s right, but I know who installed them, even if I don’t know his name or what he looks like. “We’re as close to finding them as we are who killed Zeke and all the rest.”

“Right. We’re getting closer, I can feel it.” Jay flashes his old smile and for a split second, everything feels right with the world. It feels as if maybe things will get back to normal, at least if I don’t remember that my home—for now—is Damien’s penthouse. “Wait a sec,” he mutters, his eyes dropping to his phone screen. The moment he sees it, his entire attitude shifts. “Shit. I gotta run.”

I get to my feet and grab my jacket. “Where are we going?”

“No, I have an appointment I forgot about.” His gaze flicks away from my face and I’ve played poker with him enough times in my life to know when he’s bluffing. Or lying out right.

“An appointment?” I keep the disbelief out of my tone.

“Yeah. I’ll be back later.”

It stings, but I don’t call him on it. “Are you sick? Have you been monitoring your

blood pressure like the doctor said?”

He shrugs. “As much as I can with a serial killer on the loose.” He glances down when his phone lights up again, and groans even louder. “See you soon.” Then he rushes out of the war room so fast you’d think someone caught his butt on fire.

“Fine,” I grunt to the empty room. “See you later.” Jay’s acting weird and I need to find out why. I wouldn’t put it past him to hunt down a lead on his own, mistakenly thinking that he’s doing me a favor by cutting me out of my own fucking investigation. “Not today and not this case.” I leave the office to get answers and run into Nate.

“Hey Frankie, man, I’m so fucking sorry about your house. How are you doing?”

“Wishing my house wasn’t ashes at the moment, but otherwise I’m doing about as well as you might expect.” His smile is sympathetic, and I rush to change the subject. “Hey, do you know what’s going on with Jay? He just left for another mysterious appointment he won’t talk about.” It’s the third or fourth time it’s happened recently and now I’m curious.

“Don’t know,” Nate offers with a shrug. “It’s weird he would leave now.”

I’m a little confused by the emphasis he puts on now . “Why?”

“Because there’s a smoking hot witness who just got here. A Laurel Kinney from Hope House.”

Hope House? We have a witness from Hope House in the box and Jay leaves? That doesn’t make sense, but his absence gives me the opportunity I need to talk to her without interruption. I school my features and nod at Nate. “Thanks. I’ll see you around.” I move toward the hallway where the interrogation rooms are when Nate

calls out to me.

“Are you sure you’re good, Frankie?”

I nod. “Solving this case will help. Thanks for asking!” I step into the observation room and take in the witness, Laurel Kinney. She’s attractive, sporting vibrant red curls, almond-shaped green eyes, and plump pink lips. A few freckles scattered across her cheeks and nose. Miss Kinney has a wholesome charm of the girl next door with a figure that could stop traffic.

I take a few minutes, going back to the war room to gather photos and notes before I join her in the box. “Miss Kinney, thank you for coming down to speak to us.”

Her green eyes settle on me, and she nods with a shrug. “Sure. I wasn’t there long, but when I saw the details on the news story, I thought I should come in just in case.”

It’s a smart instinct even though no women have been killed. “I appreciate that so much. Can you tell me when you lived at Hope House?”

She nods, answering the basic questions easily. “I didn’t stay very long, though. My folks were a mess, always on and off, strung out on whatever drugs were available. But a few months without me—and the check we got—was enough for them to at least fake it, act like they had their shit together. I don’t know what I can tell you, but I’m willing to try.”

I want to offer sympathy, but I know it won’t make a difference. She’s already giving off survivor vibes. “I’m hoping you can help us identify a few of the other children who stayed there while you were there.” I pull out the photos and line them up in front of her. “Do any of these kids look familiar to you?” I look up and watch her carefully, in search of any sign that she knows more than she says.

She concentrates intently on each of the images, taking her time to fully take in the details of every picture. “This guy here is Damien Wolfe. You know that gorgeous billionaire tech genius? It’s him but I remember he went by Michael back then.” Her full lips curve into a crooked smile like she’s remembering something. “He was quiet back then, kind of a weirdo but incredibly smart and nicer than most of the other guys. Guess I should’ve been nicer to him back then, huh? I could be flying high in the billions right now.”

Ouch.

My jaw tightens at her words, and I struggle to connect her description with the stunning, self-assured man I know now. It’s hard to picture Damien as Michael, the awkward kid, but I nod to show her that I’m paying attention and absorbing what she says. “Are you certain?”

She nods. “Yeah. The second I saw him on TV, I knew he was Michael from the home. Those eyes and that jawline are unforgettable even if he pretends otherwise. I don’t blame him,” she says, laying her palm over his photo. “I hide my past from the people I know too. No one needs to know my mom was a junkie.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” I nod and set that information aside for now. “Does anyone else seem familiar?”

She nods, tucking a thick red lock behind her ear. “Oh, wait, this is Zeke. He was like an amateur photographer back then, always taking candid shots that he’d sell in exchange for chores or keeping my mouth shut about curfew violations.” Her smile is wistful, and I wonder more about her time at Hope House.

“Was he a good guy?”

She nods eagerly. “Yes. He was great and trust me, after a few months in the system

you learn to identify them easily.” Her gaze flicks back to the photos and she points out a few other guys, but other than Zeke none of them are victims. Yet. “Sorry I can’t be more helpful.”

I hurry to comfort her. “You’ve been extremely helpful, Miss Kinney, I assure you.”

Her green eyes widen in fear. “Am I safe?”

I can’t deceive her, so I merely shrug. “The only victims so far have been male, so we have no reason to think you are at risk.”

Laurel swallows hard and nods. “Okay, that’s reassuring. Thank you. Is there anything else?”

I shake my head. “Do you recall anything else from your time at Hope House?”

“Not really. There weren’t many girls at the group home, so I mostly kept to myself until the social worker came to tell me that my parents had finally gotten their act together. Again.”

I slide more photos across the table. “Are you familiar with any of these women?”

Her gaze lands on Jane, Sara and a few others but she shakes her head. “I saw them around, but we were all too afraid to really get to know each other.” Laurel points to a girl in the photo. “That girl right there is Jane, Michael, or Damien’s sister. She was very artsy. Liked to do crafts and paint.” Her phone chimes and she leans back with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry. I need to pick up my twins from daycare.”

I nod my head, jotting down notes from her interview. “Thank you, Miss Kinney. You’ve been a big help. If you can think of anything else, please give me a call. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant a detail, it might be incredibly helpful.”

She nods and licks her lips. “Wish I had more. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Thank you for coming forward. It’s been really hard to get people to even admit they lived there.”

“It wasn’t exactly the best place to admit you lived in, especially back then. I know they saved me from my parents for a while, but it was a shit hole.”

“Thank you for all your help,” I say and stand to open the door.

Laurel rises, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Shit, I’m sorry. I’ve got to run. They charge me for every minute I’m late. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

Laurel’s not the first person to imply that there was more going on at Hope House than the paperwork shows and I’m not sure what to do with that information. What does it mean?

Systemic neglect and abuse or neglected kids lashing out at the system that didn’t actually look out for them?

I need to uncover the truth. She’s the first one to identify the man in the picture as Damien, and I wonder how many others will confirm it.

Regardless of where it takes me.

CHAPTER THREE

Damien

Lately, I've been so wrapped up in my own chaos that I've forgotten to properly acknowledge my sister—and my technology—both of whom deserve a little more attention.

I stroll into Serenity House with a smile on my face, looking like a loving brother without a care in the world and honestly, I have very few. Frankie is in a vulnerable state, exactly where I want her after the fire that destroyed her home, and my technology is working better than expected.

What more could a man ask for?

Oh, I know. Revenge. Pay back. Justice.

I stop in the doorway of Olivia's room to see that the doctor was right. She's doing much better than the last time I saw her. My sister is sitting upright in her wheelchair, smiling as she gazes at the ocean in the distance. "Olivia, hey."

Her eyes light up with surprise as she turns to me, and I feel a flicker of surprise myself.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" I lean in and grasp the back of her wheelchair. I navigate through the hallway and out the door, pushing the chair down the winding path until the ocean is in view and we can feel the breeze on our skin. "Your progress

is incredible. How does it feel?” I can hardly believe this is the same girl who’s been silent, absent and still for all these years.

Her lips twist into a smile, and I think she’s feeling pretty good about herself. It’s a pleasant change from her usual silence. Her color is better now, and she seems more alive. It’s hard to believe this is happening. Finally.

I take a seat on the bench at the viewpoint and absorb the splendor of the day. And Olivia.

Thoughts whirl in my head, a mix of fear, excitement and the delightful buzz of adrenaline. Tired? Not me. I thrive on the chaos, on the pieces falling into place, each one a minor victory in my twisted game of justice.

Dr. Atkins steps up, interrupting my visit and I’m a little surprised by his audacity. This should have been a private moment between me and my sister.

“Mr. Wolfe, I’ve been monitoring the responses of Olivia, and they are incredible. This is more than I hoped to expect this soon. How is your conversation going?” He’s clutching a tablet, showcasing a collection of her brain scans.

“Have you been listening to me? I told you my conversations with my sister are private.” I stand, ready to take this guy on.

“Oh, no, Mr. Wolfe,” he says quickly. “I can’t hear a thing you’re talking about. I can only see the results on the screen. Don’t you worry about that. I know how important your privacy is to you and Olivia.”

“Good,” I answer easily. “I’m happy you understand how imperative it is to protect our privacy.”

Atkins nods. “Definitely, sir. Now before you leave, I’d like to talk to you about what we’ve found and the progress we’re making. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure. I’ll find you when we go back inside.”

“Of course,” he nods, his gaze already fixed back on the tablet. “Enjoy the remainder of your visit.”

I turn back to my sister, looking at her closely. She seems so much more at peace, less haunted, but can that really be true? Her ability to speak again doesn’t erase the demons she’s battled for years. Does it?

I grab the handles on the wheelchair again and start walking back to her room. When we get there, I place her in front of the window, noticing more paintings on the wall from Chelsea.

I kneel in front of her and ask, “Olivia, are you happy with the progress?” I need to know that this is what she wants, that dedicating my life to her recovery hasn’t been in vain.

For a long time, she doesn’t respond. She doesn’t even acknowledge that she hears me, and instantly, panic rises. Is her progress just a fluke? Finally, she sighs and nods. “Yes,” she says, her voice strained but clear. The light in her eyes is back. I’m so overwhelmed right now that I have to fight back tears.

I let out a long breath. “Okay. Good. That’s really good, Olivia.” This isn’t how I imagined conversations with my sister would be at this point in our lives, but it’s more than I expected. I lean back against the chair, filling her in on my life, knowing she’s absorbing every detail.

After a while, she yawns, and I reluctantly rise to my feet.

“You’re tired, and I should let you rest.” I glance at my watch, realizing how much longer I’ve stayed than I planned. Gently, I run my hand through her hair and sigh. “This is so incredible, Olivia.” I bend down, bringing us eye to eye. “Keep up the great work.” I kiss her cheek and pull her into a hug.

“They...know.” The words come out in a whisper, strained and deliberate.

They know?

“What?” My heart skips a beat. “Who knows, Olivia? What do they know? Who’s they ?” I grab her arm, desperate for answers. “Olivia!” Her eyes widen with fear and I pull back immediately. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry.”

FUCK!

A nurse pops her head in. “Everything okay in here?”

I nod to reassure her. “Yep, just got a little excited at my sister’s progress.” As soon as she’s gone, I turn back to my sister with a serious expression. “Olivia, who knows? What do they know? I need a name, something. Please.”

Her expression is blank. Shit, shit shit. Did I send my sister back into darkness? I know better than pushing her now, no matter how badly I want answers.

Who knows and what the fuck do they know?

I give her another hug and walk out of her room heading straight to the front of Serenity House. I walk with purpose, my mind buzzing. I need answers.

The head of security looks up as I approach, his eyes wide. “Mr. Wolfe, how may I help you?”

“Has anyone other than me or Dr. Atkins been here to see Olivia?”

The guard taps at his tablet, scrolling through the log. “Let me check the visitor tracking system for you. We maintain digital records for better security and privacy.”

After a moment, he looks back up, his expression apologetic. “It seems there have been no other visitors today, but I can pull up the access logs if you need a more detailed timeline. However, it may take a couple of days to process everything, given our usual protocol.”

Frustration simmers inside me, but I keep my voice steady. No need to rattle the guy. “That’s fine, whatever it takes.”

The guard nods, his fingers dancing across the screen. “I’ll expedite the process as much as I can, Mr. Wolfe. You’ll have the information as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. Is Dr. Atkins still around?”

“No sir, he left about ten minutes ago. He usually comes in at about seven.”

Shit. I wonder if he knows what Olivia means by, they know .

I head back to the office, wondering if I fucked up somewhere along the way. No, I couldn’t have. I’m too smart for that.

I stride into the office, noting how many of my employees are dedicated enough to remain at the office at this hour. They are part of the reason my company is so successful, and a small smile touches my lips as I make my way to my corner office.

“Mr. Wolfe.” Jess hops up from behind her desk with a professionally bland smile on her face. “Good evening. Is Francesca all right?”

“She’s fine,” I answer, dismissing her question.

“It’s such a terrible thing, losing everything the way she has. If there’s anything she needs?—”

I cut Jess off. “She’s fine.” I shut her down because it seems she’s forgotten who she works for and what our relationship is.

Jess huffs, undeterred. “I’m only asking because?—”

“I said she’s fine,” I say in a voice that tells her don’t fuck with me.

“Okay. My heart goes out to her.” Her tone is properly chastising which only pisses me off further.

I turned to Jess with an angry, narrow gaze. “I said she’s fine. Drop it.”

She wants to say more but Jess’ lips snap shut, she nods and leaves me in my office. I hear a whisper, “Jerk,” as she makes her way back to her desk.

I need time alone to process everything running through my mind at the moment. Olivia’s words sounded like a warning. The question I have is were the words they know words of something she remembers from years ago, or is this a recent development?

I sit in my office, mulling over her words, piecing together who might’ve planted the idea that they know something they shouldn’t. I sift through the list of people who might know something and are still around to communicate it to my sister, but my options are limited.

So, what do they know?

I ponder the question for far too fucking long but just when I'm ready to pack it in for the night, I get a phone call.

The Serenity House surveillance footage is ready for me to view.

I'll have my answers soon enough.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Damien

Francesca's a mess, and the last thing she wants is for anyone to know. Sitting in my office, I watch her from my phone, still at the penthouse, probably wondering why I haven't been home in two nights.

God, I'm an asshole. This beautiful woman has lost everything—her parents, her home, her precious belongings—and I sit here, watching her suffer.

It hurts me to see her like this.

Right now, she's crying, letting out loud, body-quaking sobs that echo in the oversized living room. The sound is visceral, and it would be heartbreaking if I allowed myself to feel it that way.

But this is exactly what I wanted—Frankie isolated and alone, broken and wholly reliant on me. Yet, as I sit here on the leather sofa, watching her unleash all the feelings she hides from me, from Jay, from the whole fucking world, I find myself affected. By her. By watching her. Her tears stain her cheeks, marking her like a messy art project, stirring emotions in me that feel foreign and unsettling.

Feelings I never thought I'd be capable of.

You'd think I'd be ecstatic. I have Frankie exactly where I want her, right where I need her to ensure that if that if any secrets come to light, they'll never be exposed.

I tap the phone to call her, keeping my eyes glued to the screen. She picks up her phone and glances down at it, making a valiant effort to stem the flow of tears, swiping at them while taking several deep breaths before she finally answers. “Hello, Damien.” Her voice is shaky, laced with a hint of disgust. “Did you forget I’m here?”

“Francesca, I could never forget you. How are you holding up?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she snaps. “And you?”

“Better now that I hear your voice. Good day?”

“Better than yesterday, which I consider progress. Not that you would know. Where are you? Where have you been?”

“I’m still at work.” I lean back on the sofa, surprised by her anger. “Let me make it up to you. I’d love to take you out to dinner. Just you and me. You up for putting on a pretty dress and enjoying a meal with me?”

“Oh, so you’re coming home tonight?”

“I am. And I’d love to take you out.”

“Okay, I am kind of hungry.”

“Excellent. I’ll pick you up in an hour, kitten.”

There’s a long pause before she speaks again, and when she does, her voice softens. “I’ll be ready.”

I don’t have much time to prepare, so I get to my feet, calling an associate while I dress in a dark gray suit and a green shirt. I give myself one last look in the mirror

before heading out. “I’m gone for the night, Jess. You can leave when you’re finished with whatever it is you’re doing.” I don’t wait for her response. I have an appointment to keep before picking up Francesca.

“Good night,” she calls after me just as the elevator doors slide shut.

Fifty minutes later, I’m standing at the elevator to the penthouse when the doors open, revealing Francesca waiting for me. “You look stunning, Francesca.”

The green velvet dress clings to her curves, skimming mid-thigh and highlighting miles of long, shapely legs. It’s a refreshing change for a woman who usually lives in pantsuits. She’s wearing more makeup than usual, likely to mask the evidence of her earlier tears, but she looks gorgeous. Her big brown eyes glimmer, nearly golden thanks to the dark liner and full lashes.

“Thank you, Damien. You look,” she sighs, shaking her head. “As good as you always do.”

My cock twitches at the look of appreciation she gives me. “Then we’ll be the most beautiful people dining at Spanish Fly.”

Her eyes widen. “Spanish Fly? That new upscale Mediterranean place?” Her smile broadens. “I’ve heard great things about it, but they’re all booked up for the next three months.”

“That’s the beauty of being my pet.” I extend my arm, and she wraps her arm around it, leaning into me. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“I am, actually.” She tells me about her day, mentioning that her partner’s been behaving strangely and that they still have no solid leads on the Butcher of Beverly Hills. “God, how I hate that fucking name!” She lets out a laugh, shaking her head as

we walk inside the restaurant.

“I don’t know,” I tease her. “It’s got a nice bit of musicality to it.”

She snorts, staying quiet until we arrive at our private booth. “Musicality? You mean it’s catchy enough to sell papers and get clicks?”

“Sure. Isn’t that what makes the world go ‘round? Money and more money?”

She snort-laughs, and there’s almost no trace of her earlier anger. “I guess you have a point. A small one, but I’ll allow it.”

The dinner is delightful as we chat and laugh while enjoying an exquisite tasting menu crafted by a Michelin-starred chef. Frankie is lively and her cheeks flush a beautiful shade of pink. “Thank you for this, Damien. For somehow knowing what I need and giving it to me.”

Now is the time. “I’m happy to give you everything you need, Francesca. I pray you never want for anything ever again.” She blushes, taking a sip of wine.

“Damien,” she begins.

“I’m serious. I’ve never felt this way about a woman before. I’m not sure I have ever loved anyone other than my sister before, but now I find that I’m protective of you, that I can’t stop thinking about you when we’re not together. And that I want you more and more with each passing day.”

She gasps and licks her lips. “That’s so sweet, Damien.”

No one’s ever accused me of being sweet before and I get off on the fact that she sees me like that. That makes all of this easier. “I like the way I feel when I’m with you,

and I think you feel the same.” I reach inside my jacket and pull out a dark blue velvet box, setting it on the table between us. “Francesca DeMarco, will you marry me?” My heart races and I’m nervous, even though I’m certain what the answer will be.

Odd.

Frankie stares at the ring box, now open, her eyes are wide as they settle on the two-carat diamond ring. She runs her finger along the diamonds circling the band and smiles. “Damien, it’s beautiful.”

“You are more beautiful, Francesca. But this ring is a symbol of what I feel for you. Marry me?” I pull the ring from the box and slide it onto her finger. A genuine smile forms on her face. “Oh wow, Damien! This is stunning!”

It’s perfect. Too big, maybe, but she doesn’t even notice. She’s lost in the sparkle, a moment of pure magic. No grand gestures, no theatrics. Just Francesca and me. That’s all I want. Seeing her like this, happy. Like she’s the only woman in the world.

“Yes! Yes, I’ll marry you.” she says, beaming. “Oh my God, I just...I don’t...oh, Damien.”

I was certain she’d say yes. I’ve been planting seeds for almost a year. But hearing the words spill from her lips brings an unexpected wave of relief. I can’t even begin to imagine what I’d do if she’d turned me down.

A laugh rushes out of her as she nods. Her face lights up like a Christmas tree. “I love you so much, Damien Wolfe.”

My chest puffs out a little at her words. I smile and lean forward. “I love you too, Francesca.”

“I can’t believe this is real. We’re getting married!”

I take her hand in mine. “Believe it, kitten. You’re going to be my wife.”

Frankie squeezes my hand, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “There’s so much to plan! I’ll need to find the perfect dress, something classic and elegant. Oh, and the venue! Maybe a beautiful garden ceremony.”

I smile at her enthusiasm. This is exactly what I wanted—Frankie focused on our future, on building a life with me. “Whatever you want, Francesca. The sky’s the limit. I want to make all your dreams come true.”

She sighs happily, leaning in closer. “You already have. You’ve been my rock through all of this, Damien. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Hey,” I say, cupping her cheek. “I’ll always be here for you.”

Frankie turns her head, pressing a kiss on my palm. “I love you so much. I can’t wait to be your wife.”

Pride surges through me at her words. Wife. “I love you too, my pet. More than anything. You’ve brought the light back into my life.”

“We’re going to have such a wonderful future together.” She gazes at me adoringly, like I hung the moon and stars just for her.

At this moment, I’ll do anything to keep that look on her face forever. To be her savior, her everything. “I promise, Frankie, I will spend the rest of my life making you happy. Anything you want, anything you need, it’s yours.”

Tears shimmer in her eyes. “All I need is you.”

I raise her hand to my lips. “Forever and always. You and me.”

Frankie giggles. “So when should we have the wedding? Spring could be nice.”

“Spring sounds perfect. New beginnings.” I wink at her. “But take all the time you need to plan. I’ll marry you tomorrow if you want.”

“My eager fiancé,” she teases, grinning. “Don’t tempt me. I just might take you up on that.”

Stroking her hand, I marvel at how far we’ve come at how deep she’s fallen. Fool for love. But she’s my fool now. My Frankie. “I’m all yours, kitten. Mind, body and soul. We have our whole lives ahead of us.”

In this moment, I almost believe my own lie. That a monster like me could make an angel like her happy. But I’ll play the part as long as it keeps her under my spell.

Forever and always, Francesca. Till death do us part.

Heat flares in her eyes as they scan my face, landing on my lips. “Want to get out of here?”

My brows shoot up. “What about dessert?”

“I’ll be your dessert.”

I stand and toss a few hundred-dollar bills on the table and take her hand, guiding her out of the restaurant. “There’s an extra fifty for you if you get my car back here in under two minutes.”

The valet smiles, snatching the ticket from my hand and taking off down the street.

Ninety seconds later he returns with my car and thirty seconds after that I'm breaking every traffic law to get back to the penthouse. "Take off your panties," I growl impatiently when a light turns red.

Frankie's breath hitches, but she slips the black lace down her legs and dangles them in front of me, laughing when I snatch them from her and bury my nose in them. "Dirty man."

"I love the way you smell when you're turned on." My gaze flicks to her legs where she's pressing her knees together to relieve the ache.

"Well, I'm definitely turned on right now."

"I know." My cock aches behind my zipper and I hit the gas, eager to get home and bury myself deep inside her. I'm so fucking turned on I can hardly think straight and tonight, I plan to kick things up a notch. "Come on." I take her hand and pull her body against mine with a low growl.

"Yes," she moans, letting me drag her into the elevator.

The doors close and I turn to Francesca as fire pulses through my veins. Our lips fit together perfectly, and I savor the taste of her tongue against mine, the way she moans and presses her body to mine. I feel the hard tips of her nipples against my chest and when she whimpers into my mouth, I swallow it down and back her against the elevator wall.

She pulls back with a gasp, eyes foggy with desire. "Damien."

"I'm right here, Francesca."

She purrs. "I see you. I feel you." Her hips push forward hungrily, and I know what

she needs.

I lean in close enough to whisper in her ear, enjoying the shiver she's unable to suppress. "You want to feel more of me."

"Yes," she replies with a moan. "Need to."

I press myself against her hip for relief as one hand slips under her dress. The silky slide of her thighs is intoxicating, but the heat of her womanhood has a magnetic pull on me. Brushing my knuckles against her plump, bare lips.

Another gasp escapes and her hips push forward. "Please."

My lips pull up in satisfaction at that one, whispered word. "I do love it when you beg." To reward her, I spread her lips and find her clit swollen and drenched in her juices. The first touch makes her cry out.

I slip a finger inside, enjoying the way her fingertips dig into my arms at the intensity of the sensation. "I love how wet you get for me."

"Me. Too." Her words come out on gasping pants and she's already pulsing around me as the elevator rises quickly to the penthouse.

"Come for me, Francesca. Come on my hand. Do it before the doors open." The command is deep and loud enough to bounce off the elevator walls.

"I'll try." She grinds harder and her legs tremble for a few seconds before she explodes, doing exactly as I asked her to. Her juices drip down my fingers and onto my palm.

"Oh, God." Her knees buckle and she leans against me while riding out the last of her

pleasure just as the bell sounds our arrival at the penthouse.

“Such a good girl.” She’s never been more beautiful than when she gives her pleasure over to me, trusting me to take care of her.

She pulls back, licking her lips with a knowing smile as she watches me licking her juices from my fingers. “That was hot.”

“Indeed,” I growl and take her hand, guiding her out of the elevator as carnal need fires through my veins. “Such obedience deserves a proper reward.” I guide her into the main bedroom and close the door, wanting to savor this moment.

“Get naked.” My gaze burns a path over her body, and she responds, slowly peeling off the green velvet dress, letting it pool at her feet.

Such a vision of beauty.

My clothes feel tight and suffocating, so I rip them off, tossing aside the last remnants of civility along with my suit. I step closer, our bodies just a breath apart. “Get on the bed.” It’s not a request.

She does as she’s told, sinking into the soft mattress, her legs slightly parted, an invitation I can’t resist. On my knees, I part her legs further, exposing her to my gaze. “You’re so wet, kitten.” My voice is hoarse as I admire her femininity, her body’s honest response to my touch. Her scent fills my nostrils, and I lean in closer, my breath ghosts over her sensitive flesh.

A soft moan escapes her lips as I sink two fingers deep inside. I curl them, stroking that spot that makes her see stars. “Oh fuck,” she gasps, her hips bucking.

“What do you need, Francesca?” I already know the answer, but I want to hear it

from her lips. My fingers, still coated with her juices, glide over her silky skin, teasing her, tormenting her.

“You,” she replies, her eyes fluttering shut.

I withdraw my fingers, now slick with her arousal, and trace them around the tight pucker of her ass. Francesca’s breath hitches. “Relax,” I soothe, circling the sensitive flesh.

Leaning forward, I flick my tongue against her swollen clit as I slowly ease my middle finger into her ass. The dual sensations have her keening with pleasure.

“Damien!” she cries, grinding against my face.

I alternate between teasing licks and deep, probing thrusts, keeping her on edge. Her thighs begin to quiver around my head. I know she’s close.

“Don’t stop,” Francesca begs breathlessly. “Please don’t fucking stop!”

I have no intention of stopping. I redouble my efforts, sucking and licking her clit as I fuck her ass with my finger. With a strangled cry, her orgasm explodes and her hips grind against my mouth while I suck her clit until it becomes too much. “Yes!”

“That’s it, my pet. Come for me.” My voice is a low, primal command, urging her on.

Before she can fully recover, I rise and shove my aching cock deep into her still-quivering pussy. We both groan at the exquisite sensation.

“Fuck,” I grunt, struggling to maintain control. “You feel amazing, Francesca.” As I pump into her, dark thoughts swirl through my mind. The way she grips me, getting wetter with every thrust, ignites a hunger I’ve long suppressed. I want to possess her

completely, to mark her as mine in ways that go beyond the physical.

“Damien, oh, God!” she cries out, her nails digging into my back.

The pain only fuels my desire. I crave more. More pain, more pleasure, more of her. With each stroke, I push her higher, my control slipping as the monster within claws its way to the surface.

“That’s it, Frankie. Fuck me. Fuck me!” I growl, my voice barely recognizable.

Her eyes go wide. I can tell the moment she senses the shift in me, the darkness inside. Part of me wants her to be afraid, to truly understand the depths of my madness.

“Damien,” she chokes out as another orgasm washes over her. “Yes.”

I revel in her surrender, knowing she’s mine completely. I want to consume her, to merge our bodies and souls until there’s no separation between us.

My thrusts become punishing, bordering on brutal. I want to leave my mark on her, inside and out. The possessive rage inside me is boiling.

Mine, mine, mine , goes through my mind with each snap of my hips.

I lean down, my lips grazing her ear. “You’re mine, Francesca,” I hiss, my voice dripping with dark promise. “Forever. There’s no escaping me now.”

I thrust into her, harder, deeper, claiming her with relentless strokes. “Say you’ll never leave me,” I demand, my voice a hoarse whisper against her ear.

“Never,” she pants, meeting my rhythm, her body moving with mine. “I’ll never

leave you, Damien. I'm yours forever."

I lose myself in the raw, primal act, in the sensation of her body welcoming mine. I pound into her, my cock buried deep, our sweat-slicked bodies sliding together.

"Mine," I growl, my eyes fierce as I gaze down at her. "Only mine."

"Yes, Damien," she pants. "I'm yours. All yours."

Her submission fuels my darkest impulses. I grip her hips, slamming into her with abandon. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh echoes through the room, punctuated by our guttural moans.

"Fuck, Frankie," I say through gritted teeth, feeling my control slipping. "I'm close. Come with me. Now."

"Damien!" she screams, her whole body shuddering as her orgasm crashes over her.

With a growl, I bury myself to the hilt and explode inside her. Wave after wave of intense pleasure washes over me as I empty myself into her willing cunt.

This. This is what I need to fuel my vengeance. Nothing more, nothing less.

Francesca DeMarco will be the only thing that brings me to my knees.

She runs her hands over my back, a soothing touch that grounds me, pulling me back to earth. "Damien," she says softly. "That was?—"

"Extraordinary," I finish for her.

"Yes," she agrees, her eyes sparkling. "Extraordinary."

I prop myself up on one elbow, gazing down at her—my bride-to-be, my beautiful conquest. “Tell me, Francesca. Aren’t you glad you said yes?”

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CHAPTER FIVE

Frankie

Amelia's brow arches when I step inside her office with two coffee cups in my hand. She tosses her pen on the desk and leans back against her chair, and I hand her a cup. "Hey! What's going on?"

I'm bursting to tell her my news. I'm feeling good today. Damn good. Last night was perfect, and both my body and my mind are flying high. "I've got news."

"On the killer?" She takes a slow sip and then smiles. "No, that look on your face isn't about the killer, is it?"

"Nope," I say and reach for the cup with my left hand, letting her study me until her gaze lands on the giant diamond on my finger.

"Holy. Fucking. Shit." Her eyes are comically wide as she gets to her feet, takes my coffee and studies my ring. "Is that what I think it is?"

I nod, my smile so big my cheeks ache. "It is. Damien proposed last night at Spanish Fly."

"Wow." Amelia sighs, her eyes sparkling. "Judging by the glow you're rocking I'd say there was also a good amount of sexy time."

"So much sexy time," I confirm and shake my head slowly with a huge grin on my

face.

“Well,” she sighs, shaking her head. “So, I guess you said yes.”

My gaze narrows. “I did.”

Ames leans forward on her elbows. “I’m happy for you, Frankie, really and truly happy. A gorgeous billionaire who only has eyes for you wants to make it legal, that’s amazing. But it’s really soon. And you just went through a major trauma. It’s a lot for the average person.”

I lean back and fold my arms, glaring at her. “And I’m not the average person?”

“You’re kidding, right?” She huffs, rolling her eyes. “For most people, those things are enough to send them into five times a week therapy sessions, but on top of all of that, you’re hunting a serial killer who you think might be after your brand new fiancé.” Amelia sits back in her chair, mirroring my posture.

“Okay, yes, that’s a lot. I’ll give you that. But it feels right, and my gut tells me that saying yes is the right thing to do. I love him and we fit so well together despite our differences.”

Her smile comes slowly but it’s sincere. “Then I’m damn happy for you, even if that means one less smoking hot billionaire on the market for the rest of us.”

I smile. “Sorry?”

“Right.” She reaches for her coffee, taking a long sip.

“Wait a minute,” I sit up with a frown. “Who said I’m worried that Damien might get killed?” I didn’t tell anyone.

“You’re not worried?”

I shake my head. “Of course I am, but I don’t know how you know that.”

“It’s obvious. At least it was the minute you realized he stayed at Hope House.”

Shit. “Yes, I am worried about it.”

She nods. “You should be worried just because it’s natural, but I recommend that you find out why those guys were murdered if you want to know whether he’s truly at risk.” She shrugs. “He might be completely safe.”

“Yeah,” I huff and roll my eyes. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Smart ass.” We sip our coffee and talk. “Did Laurel Kinney give you anything useful?”

I shake my head. “She wasn’t at Hope House long enough, but she remembered Damien being quiet and weird, remembered Zeke taking pictures of everyone.” Everything is helpful in an investigation, even the things that aren’t. “But something feels off, Amelia. There haven’t been any murders in over two months, knock on wood, but there are still several names on the Hope House roster. We’ve talked to a few of the men we tracked down, but they didn’t give us anything.”

“Hmmm,” Amelia muses, her gaze far off like it is when she’s deep in thought. “Maybe that’s the answer. There are only a few things people are embarrassed about years later. Sex and crime are the two that come to mind most often.”

I glance at the clock, realizing I’ve been in Amelia’s office longer than I intended. “I should get going,” I say, tossing my now-empty cup into the trash can. “There’s work to do, and I still have to follow up on those leads.”

Amelia smiles and nods. “I can always count on you to keep your nose to the grindstone. Just remember to take care of yourself while you’re at it.”

I smile back, appreciating her concern, even if I don’t always show it. “Thanks, Ames. I’ll see you later.”

“Congrats on the engagement. You did good.”

I turn and say, “Thanks.” before heading to my office, admiring the diamond on my finger.

Amelia’s words stick with me for the rest of the day. Sex and crime are so fucking vague it could be anything. They could’ve been experimenting together as teenagers sometimes do, or maybe they robbed houses together, ran a pick pocketing ring downtown or any of a hundred other options. “How does it all fit together?”

I spend the afternoon going through criminal records, even the sealed ones of all the kids who lived there during the time our victims did when I finally get closer. “It’s something that went unreported. Of course!” I feel silly for not realizing it sooner, but that’s the obvious answer. The boys committed a crime together and someone is making sure they don’t blab about it.

The question is why?

“Why what?” Jay’s question pulls me out of my head, and I look up with a wary glance because there’s a weirdness between us that’s never been there before and I don’t like it, but I’m not ready to question it.

“Nothing,” I answer quickly. “I’m heading home for the night. I’ll see you in the morning.” I leave the precinct, ready to spend the evening with my fiancé, at least until Damien texts that he’s going to be late.

Again.

I cuddle up with some tea and a book and fall asleep on the couch.

“So, where’s the crime scene?” I ask Jay as I slide into the passenger seat of his sedan.

Jay flashes me with a grin, but something about it feels wrong. Too forced. Too casual. “Two blocks from where Hope House used to be.”

My stomach churns. “Wow. That’s too obvious, even for this guy. Maybe especially for him.” None of this makes sense. “Is this the Butcher of Beverly Hills, or are we just next in the rotation?”

Jay arches one brow in my direction. “Since when are you using that stupid fucking name?”

“It’s better than calling him the unsub or the killer. This makes him sound like a killer in a cheesy horror movie.”

Jay lets out a snort laugh, but it feels hollow. The rain outside pounds harder, the windshield wipers barely keep up, squeaking with each pass. “They haven’t ID’d this guy. But they think he’s one of ours.”

Something’s off. Something about Jay feels wrong. Secrets hang in the air between us, and I don’t like it.

“So, what’s your theory? I know you’ve got one,” he asks, voice casual but with an edge I can’t place.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because yesterday I caught you staring into space and talking to yourself. Usually when that happens you come up with something useful.”

That hits me wrong. “Yesterday?” I blink. “That’s—” But the thought slips away as quickly as it came. “I think the boys got into something bigger—maybe a robbery or something with gangs. The question is, why now?”

Jay hums thoughtfully, his grip tightening on the steering wheel as he weaves through the traffic, which has slowed to a crawl in the rain. “Why can’t anyone drive in the rain?” His hand slams the horn, and the sound is grating, too loud in the quiet of the car. “Every damn time.”

I glance out the window, the world blurring through the downpour. “What do you think of my theory?”

“It holds up,” Jay says flatly. “But we’ll only catch him if we figure out exactly what they did and why it’s coming back to bite them now.” He flips the turn signal, the clicking unnervingly loud. “You know what I’m wondering?”

“What?”

“What if the killer isn’t in the photo?”

“I assumed he was.”

“You assumed,” Jay repeats, his voice almost amused. “But there’s more names than faces. Ever think maybe we’re barking up the wrong tree?”

The car comes to a stop, and Jay steps out into the rain without another word. His door slams, the sound echoing through my head. I follow him out, but everything feels strange, unreal. The house we’re approaching—abandoned, two stories

high—feels suffocating, its presence heavy, wrong.

“Where’s the body?” I call out, but my voice feels distant, like it’s being swallowed by the rain.

“Over here,” Jay says, walking toward the backyard. I try to move, but my steps slow. The wet grass clings to my boots, dragging me down. I glance down, and the boots are gone. In their place, I’m wearing the same black heels from the night Damien proposed.

“What the hell?” Panic rises in my chest.

“You coming?” Jay’s voice sounds far away, distorted.

“Yeah,” I mutter, forcing myself forward. “My foot got stuck.”

Jay reaches the crime scene first, standing over the tarp, waiting. “Sorry, kid,” he says, voice quiet now, but with something darker behind it.

“What are you sorry for?” I ask, finally catching up with him. My hands shake as I kneel and pull back the tarp.

And then I see him. The face—ashen, lifeless. His hazel eyes...gone. Nothing but hollow sockets staring back at me.

“Damien?” My voice is a strangled whisper. I yank the tarp back further, and there it is—his body slashed open, his guts spilling out in a grotesque display. My heart stops.

“Damien!” I scream, my voice breaking as I fall to my knees. I’m shaking, sobbing, the sound torn from my chest. He’s dead.

And then, Jay's voice breaks through the noise, calm and cold. "Well...I guess now we know he's not the killer."

The words hit like ice in my veins. I whip my head around to face Jay, but he's already walking away, his figure fading into the rain.

I turn back to the body and scream "Damien!"

"Francesca, wake up!" Damien's voice pierces the fog of my nightmare.

I jolt awake, gasping for air, my heart racing. "Damien—no!"

His hazel eyes, warm and steady, hold my gaze. "I'm right here, Francesca. Look at me," he says, his voice gentle but firm.

Relief floods me as I reach for him, my fingers trembling as they brush against his skin. "Damien..." I whisper. "You're alive."

He frowns, his brow knitting together. "Of course, I am."

A shaky breath escapes me, and the memory of his lifeless body, his hollow eyes, clutches at my chest. I cling to him, grounding myself in his warmth and his steady heartbeat. "It was horrible... Jay thought you might be the killer."

A shadow flickers across Damien's face. "Jay thinks I'm the killer?"

My throat tightens. "It felt so real. The blood...the guts..."

He reaches out, his thumb brushing softly along my cheek. "My precious pet, it was only a dream," he says, pulling me into a hug.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck, letting his warmth and familiar scent ease the fear. “It just felt so real,” I whisper, my voice still trembling.

He holds me tighter, his fingers tracing gentle circles on my back. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Not in this world, not even in your dreams,” he says.

I close my eyes, feeling the tension slowly unravel as his heart beats steadily and strong beneath my cheek. For now, wrapped in his arms, the nightmare fades, leaving only the quiet comfort of his presence.

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CHAPTER SIX

Frankie

The next morning, I'm still shaken by the dream and my focus is shot to hell. Every blink brings with it that haunting image of Damien with his eyes stabbed out and his guts spilling out of his lifeless body. Damien held me all night, whispering reassuring words in my ear until I fell asleep in his arms.

"Come on, DeMarco. We're going on a field trip." Jay's wearing one of his shit-eating grins, which means he's got something.

My brows shoot up at the similarities from the dream. "It's not a crime scene, is it?"

"Hell no," he scoffs. "I managed to track down a very important witness who might give us some valuable information."

I frown, thinking about another thought I had in the nightmare. "That's properly vague. Why?"

His brows dip and he stares at me. "Why do you sound so suspicious? You used to like it when I surprised you with important case information." He laughs. "Now that you got that big rock on your finger, us plebs no longer amuse you?"

"Plebs?" I bark out a laugh. "What in the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you're about to be Mrs. Billionaire and suddenly you're suspicious."

His lips pinch together as we weave through traffic. “You don’t trust me now?”

I could let it go, but now is as good a time as any to clear the air. “It’s not that I don’t trust you I mean geez, you’re my partner. it’s because you’ve been acting weird lately.”

“How so?”

“Well, you run off at the most inopportune times, like when Laurel Kinney was at the precinct. You haven’t seen Cassandra in weeks, and I just think something’s going on. That’s all.”

“Hang on, now. I’m entitled to my secrets.”

“You are,” I agree. “Of course you are, but if you’re sick or dying, I don’t want to find out after you’re already dead. I can’t deal with that shit again, Jay.”

He’s quiet for a long time before he lays one of his hands on top of mine. “I’d never do that to you, Frankie. Not in a million years.”

“Good.” We finish the ride in silence before pulling up to what looks like a seaside college town. “Serenity House. Why are we here?”

“Because while you were busy living out your fairy tale life, I was doing actual work.” His eyes are full of amusement, which is the only thing that stops me from giving him a smart-ass comment. “While you were busy tracking down the other boys in those photos, I figured I might look into more of the girls, see what they remember.”

I shake my head. “I knew you were chasing down leads without me.”

He shrugs off my annoyance. “You were busy doing your thing and you know, dealing with your entire life burning to the fucking ground. Figured you wouldn’t want the case to go the same route.”

He’s right. “Okay, and who’s are we seeing here?”

He blinks rapidly and slowly his expression shifts to shock. “Seriously?”

My brows tug down. “Should I know? Laurel says she lives in Santa Monica, so I know it’s not her. Who lives here?”

“Olivia Jane Wolfe. Your soon to be sister-in-law.” The weight of his stare should piss me off, but I’m embarrassed because I’m marrying Damien, and I don’t know where his sister lives.

Because he didn’t tell me. “Right.”

“You didn’t know?” There’s no judgment in his tone, which only makes it worse.

“No. I didn’t know. I haven’t met her yet.”

“Yeah well,” he says and pushes the driver’s side door open and steps out with an exaggerated grunt. “Things with you and Damien have moved pretty fast.”

“You think I’m making a mistake?” I step out of the car and stare at him over the roof. “Everyone else has an opinion yet I haven’t heard yours.”

His shoulders rise and fall, his expression is thoughtfully bland. “Anything I say gonna change your mind?”

“Probably not, but when have you ever held your tongue?”

“Lots of times,” he jokes as we head to the entrance. “That’s why you still love me.”

“Funny. So?”

He stops right before the massive wooden doors that look as if they lead to a castle rather than an ocean side rehabilitation facility for the ultra-wealthy. “So, do you love this guy? I mean do you really fucking love him or is this infatuation with his good looks and money?”

I give myself a moment to consider his question, but I don’t need much time. “I love him. He’s not intimidated by my job or overly interested in it. He doesn’t think that because I handle murders every day at work that he shouldn’t treat me like a woman. He cares about me and my work. I love him.”

“Then I’m happy for you, kid. That’s all I ever wanted for you and if Richie Rich is what makes you happy, I’m on board. But they’ll never find his body if he hurts you.”

His words help release the tension in my body and warmth spreads throughout. “Thanks, Jay.”

“Of course. But make sure you give him hell about me introducing you to his sister before he did.”

My lips pull into the semblance of a grin that I don’t feel because I should’ve met his sister by now, shouldn’t I? She’s going to be family, sure, but more than that Damien has to know that we’d eventually find her in the course of our investigation. “I will,” I answer, and then we step inside.

A friendly nurse wearing a name tag that says Tara greets Jay with a smile. “Detective, you’re back.”

“Yep. Needed to do things the right way. Think we can talk to Miss Wolfe today?”

She nods. “Miss Wolfe doesn’t speak. Her brother comes a few times a week and she’s getting better, but I really don’t think she can tell you anything. So don’t get your hopes up.”

“Never do,” Jay assures her and motions for her to lead the way. “Does she have any other visitors?”

“No, just her brother and the doctors. He’s very devoted to her.”

I step inside the room and shock pulses through me at the sight of the woman with thick blonde hair and when she turns, big blue eyes that are nothing at all like Damien’s dark looks.

Olivia looks me and then Jay, her gaze wary and her expression stiff. She doesn’t say a word, but her body language is speaking loud and clear about her obvious discomfort.

“There’s a call button right here if you need anything,” Tara says before leaving us alone.

“Hi Olivia, I’m Detective DeMarco and this is my partner, Detective Hawkins. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your time at Hope House, if that’s all right?”

Something flares in her blue eyes but it’s difficult to decipher because I haven’t gotten a good read on her yet.

Her gaze snaps to Jay. The change is instant and alarming.

Her breathing accelerates. Her fingers dig into the wheelchair’s armrests, tendons

straining against skin. She leans forward, eyes wide and wild, darting between Jay and the door.

Jay shifts his weight. Olivia jerks back, her whole body tenses.

Fuck. She knows something.

I glance at Jay. He looks confused. Meanwhile, Olivia's silent panic fills the room.

We've stumbled into something big here.

I sigh and stand up straight, staring at my partner. "Maybe this is a conversation that only requires us girls?" I'm trying to be subtle, but Jay is frowning and looking around as if I'm not addressing him directly.

"Why?"

"Because," I say through clenched teeth. "She seems agitated by you. Maybe she's uncomfortable."

Jay snorts. "Maybe she's upset because she's in a loony bin."

"Jay. Give us a minute."

He throws his hands up, clearly annoyed. "Fine. I'll go see if I can find anything else."

When he's gone, I take a seat on the windowsill, so Olivia and I are looking at one another. "Is that better? Can you answer some of my questions now?"

Her expression remains blank. I've seen my share of trauma victims, but something

about Olivia's reaction chills me to the bone. I wonder what horrors lie behind those big blue eyes.

"Olivia, I'm here to help you. If someone has hurt you or threatened you, I can help."

Nothing.

"You and I haven't met but I'm dating your brother Damien. In fact, we recently got engaged." I show off the ring in hopes it'll pull a reaction out of her.

Still nothing.

Dammit. "I'm worried about Damien. He's in this picture, and so many of these men are now dead. I can't bear the thought that he might next." I don't want to agitate her further, but I need her to understand the stakes here. "Anything you can tell me about that time would be great."

With a small shake of her head, Olivia turns her gaze back to the ocean beyond her window, effectively dismissing me.

I stop trying. I can't pressure her. "It was nice to meet you." I get up and walk out the door toward Jay who's standing by the exit.

"The all-girl chat session didn't work as well as you'd hoped?"

"No," I sigh. "I told her Damien and I are engaged, hoping it would spark something, but she's not capable of telling us anything." Still, I know her reaction to Jay wasn't imagined but I put that thought aside for later scrutiny. "Did your digging unearth anything?"

"Hell no," he growls. "I asked around about why she was in here and no one will tell

me anything. I threatened to get a subpoena for her medical records, and they don't have them. What the fuck kind of shit is that?" He shakes his head with a laugh. "Makes no sense."

It doesn't, actually. "Why would this place not have her medical records when she's been here for such a long time?"

Jay perks up. "They have the records of her care here inside the facility, which are medical and mental. But she has an outside doctor for other things, but what that means I can't tell ya because they wouldn't tell me."

My mind races with all the doctors a woman in her position might need. "Gynecologist. Internal medicine. Off the top of my head, those are things they might not handle in-house. But the chances of us getting those records without a clear legal reason are slim to fuck no."

Jay grunts his disapproval. "Fucking red tape."

I laugh. "I know, those pesky constitutional rights."

"You know what I mean. Come on then, let's see who else we can track down...unless you have a spa day or something you can't miss?"

I smack his arm. "Shut up. Let's go." I spend most of the drive trying to figure out what all this means while Jay grumbles at the baseball game on the radio.

Things almost feel normal and if I don't think about it too hard, about my house and my engagement, it's as if things are as they've always been.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Damien

“You have a call, sir, from Serenity House.” Jess is standing in my doorway with a worried expression on her face. “I figured you’d want to take it. I’ll push back the meeting with Volper Technologies. Ten minutes?”

I nod. “Make it fifteen just to be sure.”

Jess nods before leaving me to deal with the phone call. “This is Damien.”

“Mr. Wolfe, this is Tara, the nurse at Serenity House. I’m not sure of protocol here, but two detectives were here to speak with your sister today. Detectives DeMarco and Hawkins. I thought you should know.”

Two detectives went to see Olivia, but they weren’t just any detectives. It was my fiancé and her partner. And Francesca hasn’t said a word. “Did they give any indication what they wanted with Olivia?”

“No,” she sighs. “They were asking questions, but your sister was incredibly uncooperative.” Tara sounds proud of my sister, which is also what I feel, but it’s mixed with relief. And annoyance.

What do they want with Olivia?

My heart speeds up. Francesca and Hawkins are getting too close for comfort. I

haven't stepped out for a night or taken anyone's life in ages, all thanks to their little games.

They know. Olivia's words echo in my mind, heavy with an undeniable certainty. Someone is onto something, and until I can untangle this mess, I have to keep my head down.

I take a deep breath and get my emotions under control as quickly as I can. "Do you have any idea what they talked about?"

"Olivia didn't say anything that I'm aware of. She's been silent since their visit, and I thought you'd want to know."

Nurse Tara is the ideal little informant. She's got a soft spot for her patients and doesn't hesitate to throw anyone under the bus as long as she protects her patients. "I wanted to put a stop to it, but you know how the law is."

"It's fine," I assure her. "Is this the first time? How is Olivia?"

"It's the first time that I know of. And Olivia is Olivia. Totally unbothered."

Good. "So, she's fine?"

"Seems to be yes, but she's spending more time staring at the ocean."

I nod even though she can't see me. "Okay. Keep her calm and relaxed, and if she needs anything else, please let me know. I'll be out there tomorrow morning, early."

"Of course."

"Thank you." I end the call and sit back in my chair, staring into space for much

longer than I should. What the hell does Frankie think she's doing, questioning my sister about anything?

Are the police the they Olivia meant when she said that they know ? What do they know and does that mean Frankie and her partner have figured something out that she hasn't shared with me? I don't have any answers and that doesn't sit right with me.

I've navigated these waters for years without a hitch, slipping through the cracks like a shadow. But now? There's a gnawing unease creeping in, a little voice whispering about the possibility of being caught. It's absurd, I know, but I'm stuck with this unsettling feeling. All I can do is shake it off.

I've been keeping my head down, a necessary tactic to slip past Francesca and her partner's watchful eyes. But it's not enough to quell the anger inside me. The itch is relentless, urging me to hit the streets and remind those idiots that I'm still here. I want to see the fear flicker in their eyes, to disrupt the insignificant lives they've created.

They don't get peace.

Not now, not ever.

I head to the conference room to meet with the men from Volper Technologies, even though it's the last fucking place on earth I want to be. I need their technology, and they need my money, so it's a match made in heaven, but who are we kidding? I can do this—and more—on my own.

I just don't want them to have the technology.

I head to the conference room to meet with the men from Volper Technologies, even though it's the last place I want to be. I need their technology, and they need my

money, so it's a match made in heaven. But let's be real—I could do this and more on my own. I just don't want them to have the tech.

As I approach the conference room, I hear the faint chatter of excited voices coming from inside. I take a breath and push the door open, stepping in.

Inside, a trio of Gen Z tech nerds sit at the table, their sharp angles and even sharper smiles suggesting they've just come from a fashion shoot. They look like they're about to audition for TikTok, brimming with energy and enthusiasm.

I take a seat, leaning back in my chair to exude an aura of calm confidence. This is my domain, and I intend to remind them of that.

“Gentlemen let's dispense with the pleasantries,” I say, my voice steady and commanding.

“Mr. Wolfe, thank you for meeting with us,” the frontman, a slick-haired kid named Carson, chimes in. “We appreciate your time.”

“I want your company. Give me a number.”

They look at each other, stunned, as if I've just thrown a grenade into the room. Carson clears his throat, trying to regain his composure. “Uh, well, we were hoping to present our proposal first?—”

“I'm not interested in your pitch,” I interrupt, holding up a hand. “Just the numbers. What's it going to take for me to own you?”

Another guy, slightly taller with a nervous twitch, stammers, “We have innovative technology that can change the game?—”

I cut him off again. “I’m sure you do. But let’s skip the sales pitch. What’s the price?”

The room goes still, a tense silence settling as they scramble to gather their thoughts. Carson opens his mouth, then closes it, clearly thrown by my bluntness. “Well, we?—”

“Just a number,” I say, my tone sharp and unyielding. “What’s it worth to you to walk out of here with your dignity intact?”

The third guy, a stocky type with a pinched face, finally speaks up. “We’re valuing the company at seven million, but?—”

“Done.” I don’t let him finish. “My assistant will call you tomorrow to finalize.”

They exchange glances as they pack up, hurrying but not without a hint of excitement in their eyes. They’re just kids and I just made their day, hell, their whole lives.

I press the intercom button. “Jess, come in here, please.”

“Right away, Mr. Wolfe.”

Within seconds, Jess steps into the room. “What do you need?”

“Clear my schedule. And set up the arrangement we discussed.”

Her brows knit slightly. “Now?”

“Yes. Immediately.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Damien

“Hey.” Francesca greets me with a sexy upturn of her lips when I walk into the penthouse. She seems relaxed and easygoing, no word about the visit with my sister. “How was your day?”

I close the distance, leaning in to kiss her. “Excellent,” I lie, pulling back with a smirk. “Except for missing you. How was your day?”

“Good,” she answers easily. “Nothing all that exciting, just your everyday police work. Why was your day so good?” she shoots back, and I can’t tell if she genuinely wants to know or if she’s trying to throw me off.

“I had a very informative meeting on a deal I’m working on, which always makes me feel good.” I wait, curious if she’ll mention her meeting with Olivia.

Is this what our marriage will be like? Both of us lying to each other by omission? Does it matter? This marriage isn’t meant to be a forever and ever type of love. It’s a pragmatic agreement that helps us both even if Francesca doesn’t know it yet.

“I love it when you feel good,” she purrs, rubbing her hands up and down my chest and torso.

“Yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

“What are my options?” she asks, her hands already working my pants button and zipper. “Because I have ideas. Really, really good ideas.”

My cock stiffens at her playful tone and the way she unwraps me like a gift is almost more than I can take. “What do you want?”

“Everything,” she breathes. “You.”

“Perfect answer,” I growl, pulling her flush against me. “Show me.”

Frankie sinks to her knees, stroking my cock in her hands until I’m thrusting into her grip, a low growl escaping. Her tongue flicks against the head of my cock while her left hand cradles my sac. “I love having you in my hands, at my mercy like this.”

She begins to push-crawl me backward, her mouth never leaving my cock. Each step back sends a thrill through me, the power dynamic shifting as she guides me to the wall.

“How much?” I ask when my back touches the wall.

“This much.” She takes me in both of her hands and sucks me deep in her throat.

“You like sucking my cock?”

She nods, sucking me a little deeper. The feel of her lips, tongue and warm mouth on my cock is almost unbearable. It feels so good. Letting her take the lead and grasp the reins feels amazing. “Francesca.”

Her hands grip my ass cheeks, pulling me deeper into her mouth with a soft grunt. She’s taking my cock like it’s the only thing in this world she wants or needs. She lets her throat open and close around me, sucking me off until my legs tremble.

Frankie's moans grow louder, and I can barely hang on against the feel of her tongue and her lips on my cock. I watch her work my cock to perfection, taking me in slow, deep strokes until my body trembles with the need to come.

I hold back, unwilling to let the pleasure break free just yet. "Yeah, just like that. Suck it."

She flicks a teasing gaze at me, which shatters my defenses completely. Frankie takes me long and deep until my legs quake and my hand grips her hair, and I yank her away from my cock. "Get up. Now." There's an animal within me who needs nothing more than to claim my woman again.

Frankie stands, an expectant expression on her face as she waits to see what I'll say or do next. "Here I am."

I guide her to the couch, the city lights bathing us in a soft glow, creating an intimate atmosphere. I sit down and pull her onto my lap, our bodies pressed tightly together, facing each other. "You feel incredible," I say, my lips brushing against her ear.

She moans softly, grinding against me. "Damien, please."

I grip her hips and lift her slightly, positioning her over my cock. Her eyes meet mine, filled with desire and love. "Take what you need, Frankie."

She lowers herself onto me, a gasp escaping her lips as she slides down my length. The sensation is intense, the connection between us electric. "Oh, God," she breathes, her body trembling.

"That's right, Frankie. Take it all," I growl, my hands gripping her hips tighter. The feel of her surrounding me is almost too much, but I hold back, wanting to savor every moment.

She begins to move, riding me slowly at first, then faster, her breath coming in ragged gasps. “Damien, yes!” Her nails dig into my shoulders, her eyes locked onto mine.

I can see the pleasure in her gaze, the raw need that matches my own. “You feel so good,” I say, my voice rough with emotion. “So fucking good.”

She leans in, her lips finding mine in a heated kiss. Our tongues clash, our breaths mingling as we move together, the intensity building with each thrust.

“Fuck, Damien,” she moans against my lips, her body trembling as she chases her release.

I grip her tighter, driving into her with more force. “That’s it, Frankie. Take it all. Take everything you need.”

Her body convulses, her cunt clenching around me as she comes, a cry of pleasure escaping her lips. “Damien!”

I watch her, the sight of her losing control sending me over the edge. “Fuck!” I roar, my own release hitting me hard. I empty myself into her, our bodies shaking with the intensity of our shared orgasm.

It takes a few minutes before our breathing returns to normal, but when it does, I pull her close and let out a satisfied sigh.

“This is nice,” she purrs and buries her head against my chest.

It is nice. It’s more than nice. “It’s perfect,” I agree and wrap my arms around her.

After a few moments, I say what’s on my mind. “We should get married soon. This weekend.”

Frankie goes still for an extended moment and then she gasps, pulling back to look at me. “What? We can’t plan a wedding in a week!” She shakes her head. “I still have to pick out colors and get a dress, pick out a venue and about a million other things.”

“Calm down, kitten. It’s all taken care of.”

Her gaze meets mine. “What? What do you mean it’s all taken care of ?” She shakes her head. “You can’t just take care of our wedding. What the hell?”

“Sure, I can. I have people who can manage the details, and these details can be taken care of by next weekend. That’s a full week, plenty of time.”

“Damien, are you serious? I only plan to get married once and I’m not going to let someone else manage it for me. Some details? Sure. But all of them?”

I sigh and hold her close. “Oh, my precious pet, the only thing I’m asking is for you to trust me. Can you do that, trust me?”

“Of course I trust you, Damien. I wouldn’t have said yes otherwise.”

“Good.” I kiss the top of her head. “You know I’m very busy at work and you’re busy hunting down a serial killer. I refuse to let him dictate our lives. I just want to help, to make it perfect for you. I don’t want you stressing on the details.”

Frankie pulls back slightly, her eyes narrowing as she looks at me. “Damien, I appreciate the thought, but I’m not some damsel in distress who can’t manage planning her own wedding. I want to be involved. I need to be involved.”

I sigh, my grip on her tightening. “Francesca, I understand that. But this is the best way. Trust me. It’ll be perfect.”

She shakes her head, her voice firm. “No, Damien. This isn’t just about the details. This is our wedding. I want to choose my dress, the colors, the venue—all of it. I’m not going to be sidelined in my own wedding planning.”

“Francesca,” I say, my voice softening. “I get it. But I’m doing this for you. You don’t need to worry about the details. I promise it will be perfect.”

Her eyes flash with anger, and I can see the hurt behind them. “You’re not even listening to me.”

“I am listening,” I insist, forcing a calmness into my tone. “You need to relax and enjoy this. I don’t want to fight with you about something that should be beautiful. Let me take care of things. You’re going to love what I’ve planned.”

She sighs, her shoulders slumping slightly, but her voice remains resolute. “Fine. But I still want to be involved. This is important to me.”

“Of course,” I say, pulling her close again. “You are involved. It’s your wedding. You just need to show up and be happy. That’s all I want for you. For us.”

For a second, she studies my face, searching for something, and I hold her gaze, willing her to see the truth in my words. Slowly her body eases, just slightly. “I know. Me too.”

“Good,” I say and tap her butt cheek. “Now, let’s get your pretty ass into bed. I need to get to the office.”

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CHAPTER NINE

Frankie

“Oh my God, Frankie, this better be an emergency,” Amelia groans into the phone. “And I’m talking about a friend emergency, not a cop emergency.”

I stifle a laugh and sigh. “It’s not an emergency, but this is a friend call.” It’s Saturday morning and after a late Friday staring at the white board full of victims’ faces, I need some time to myself. “I can tell you right now or you can meet me at Beans & Things in forty-five minutes.”

Amelia grunts and I can almost see her rolling her eyes. “Forty-five minutes,” she shrieks. “You think I can get ready to be seen out in the world in forty-five minutes?”

“I think you’d better try or else I won’t tell you the big news and ask you something really important.” I shouldn’t tease her first thing in the morning, but she makes it so easy, and also this is my only day to get this task done.

“Fine, but I expect a triple espresso and a chocolate peanut butter croissant waiting for me when I get there. Both of them better be hot.” She laughs before the call ends.

I shower and dress quickly in jeans and a silky blouse before leaving the house. Damien left early to take care of some conference call somewhere across the globe, so this is the perfect time to prepare for a shotgun wedding, minus the shotgun.

Walking inside Beans & Things reminds me of the first time I met Damien and my

misconceptions about him. He's not an arrogant prick who thinks only about himself. He's cocky as hell, to be sure, but he's also the most attentive and caring man I've ever met. He actually replaced my shirt with one that was at least five times more expensive than the one I'd got on sale at Target. So much in my life has changed since that day and there's no going back.

Sure, we still haven't found the Butcher of Beverly Hills, but we're close, I'm sure of it, but everything else is so different. I'm here at my favorite coffee shop waiting for Amelia because I want to share one of the most special days of my life with her, my closest—okay, only—female friend.

"Coffee," she growls the moment she drops down on the seat across from me. I watch with amusement as she takes a giant gulp of the hot drink, winces at the pain, and does it again.

"Shouldn't you be immune to these ridiculous mistakes as a head shrinker?"

She glares at me. "It's early and I need coffee. Hot, black bean juice. Don't judge."

"Not judging. In fact, it's amusing watching you burn your mouth and go back for more." I laugh and she glares at me over the rim of her triple espresso.

After several more sips, Amelia lets out a sigh with her gaze fixed on me. "Okay, I'm human, now. So, what's up? You never call in favors, so what do you need help with? Hiding a body? An alibi? Girlfriend therapy session?"

"What is wrong with you?"

She shrugs, a crooked grin tilting her lips up. "So many things, which I'll tell you about after you tell me why we're up so early on a Saturday." She takes a bite of the croissant, letting out an erotic groan while her eyes cross. "Well?"

“Well,” I sigh and lick my lips. “Remember how Damien and I are engaged?” I hold up my left hand, wiggling my ring finger. “Well, he wants to get married right away, as in next weekend.” I let the words hang in the air between us, mostly because I’m still trying to figure out how I feel about having the wedding so soon. Not that I want a long engagement, I don’t, but my plan isn’t to kill myself by planning a wedding in seven days. Less than seven, actually.

Amelia’s eyes go round with shock, and she sets her coffee cup down hard enough that some sloshes over her fingers. “Wait a minute. You just got engaged like five minutes ago and now you’re getting married next week? What’s the rush?” She gasps before covering her mouth, making a big dramatic show out of it as she leans forward and whispers, “Are you pregnant?”

“What? No, Amelia, I am not pregnant.” At least I don’t think I am. Shit, note to self, check my calendar after today.

“Then what’s the rush?”

Good question. “Why not? When you know, you know. Right?”

“Sure,” she nods slowly, her gaze assessing like she does when she’s in therapist mode. “And this feels right to you?”

“Of course.” My brows dip and I drop back against the chair with a sigh. “But it doesn’t feel right to you?”

She holds up her hands in a defensive gesture. “It doesn’t have to feel right to me, Frankie. I’m not the one getting married.”

“Okay, fine. Yes, it’s fast, but I’m okay with that. Tell me why I shouldn’t be?”

“Seriously?”

I nod. “Yes. Maybe there’s something I’m not considering, so shrink me and let me consider.”

“Okay fine.” She sits up tall with her shoulders squared and her gaze on my face, watching me. Studying me. “It seems rather controlling to rush a wedding when it’s clear you want a big wedding that takes time to plan. And is he really going to plan this wedding on his own?”

I shake my head. “His assistant Jess is doing most of the planning, so it’ll be big- ish I expect but the guest list will be small and intimate. This isn’t a big celebrity event.” But she’s right, it won’t be the wedding I want, not completely.

“See? Controlling. His assistant, the woman who works for him and who is definitely going to do what he wants, is planning your wedding. Tell me why that’s okay.”

“It’s kind of nice to have a man who’s so excited to marry me he’s willing to pay an obscene amount of money to do it as quickly as possible. That’s sweet, incredibly sweet. It’s romantic.” That’s how I see it, anyway. I take a sip of my now cool coffee and wait for her professional assessment while my heart gallops in my chest. “Well?”

“Well,” she repeats softly. “That is certainly a different way of looking at it. Although I think you’ve been hypnotized by the billionaire. But I trust your judgment, Frankie.”

I don’t know why her words fill me with relief, but they do. “You do?”

“Hell yeah. If you were anyone else, I’d be staging an intervention right now, but you’re you and I’m not. Does this mean you dragged me out of bed to go dress shopping?”

I nod slowly and my smile grows bigger by the second. “I did. I need a wedding dress, and you need a maid of honor dress.” Telling is better than asking in these situations, right?

If possible, her eyes get even rounder and bigger. “Me? You want me to be your maid of honor?”

“Of course. Who else? I don’t think Jay will wear a dress as well as you do,” I joke. “Seriously, you’re my closest friend. Who else would I have at my side when I get married?”

She blinks her fiery lashes rapidly to stem the flow of tears. “Frankie, I’d be honored.” She reaches for my hand, giving it a squeeze, and I let her because she seems to need the connection more than I do. “Does this mean I get to plan a raunchy bachelorette party?”

“I’m not sure if I have the energy for raunchy, but a night with some greasy food and free flowing drinks sounds good.”

“Boring,” she growls and finishes her coffee, tossing it in the trash near the door. “Come on, let’s get us some dresses!”

She’s more excited than I am and that’s exactly why I need her with me. I can’t wait to marry Damien, but I’m not effusive the way Amelia is in my excitement, and it feels like what I need for this moment in my life. “Yeah, let’s.”

“This is the best place in town for elegant dresses that your groom-to-be can definitely afford.” Amelia’s smile is big as she lays her hands on my shoulders just outside the bridal boutique that looks too expensive for my wallet. Good thing I have Damien’s credit card. “So don’t you dare reject a dress based on price. Got it?”

I nod. “Yeah, okay. I’m not buying it anyway,” I say the moment one of the elegantly dressed women hands me a crystal flute of champagne. “Thank you,” I say, fully intimidated by the big display.

“So, what are we thinking?” The woman in charge is ultra stylish with a chin-length silver bob, an all-black outfit punctuated by red stilettos. She eyes me carefully. “Tell me what you’re looking for and I’ll bring you what you want and what I think will look good on you. And let’s go from there.” She points to the glass. “Drink. It’ll make this easier.”

“Thank you.” I’m not sure what I want in a wedding dress, and I tell her as much. “Something elegant and sophisticated, but I don’t want a dress that looks like it’s wearing me.”

This answer seems to please her. “Got it.”

“So, this makes it real,” Amelia whispers a little too loudly. “How do you feel?”

Time for some radical honesty, with me mostly. “Excited. Terrified. Like I’m not sure about anything right now. I want to marry Damien, I love him, but that’s the only thing I know. This wedding. The Butcher. My fears. It’s a lot to process, and I think it’s all getting jumbled in my head.”

“That makes sense. You have a lot going on right now and none of it is your everyday stressor. I mean even you don’t regularly chase serial killers, especially one who may or may not be after your fiancé who happens to be a well-known billionaire. It’s a lot and I’d be more surprised if you weren’t feeling all the feelings .”

I sigh. “Thank you, Ames.”

“Of course.” She bumps my shoulder and refills our flutes. “Is Hottie McMoney-Bags

going to let you keep chasing down the killers of this great city?”

My brows pinch together as I think about her question. “It’s not something Damien and I have talked about, but I don’t plan on retiring soon.” I love my job. It’s been the one steady thing in my adult life, and I won’t give it up, not even for Damien.

“And Damien is all right with that?”

I shrug. “He’ll have to be. I love him and while he might be incredibly powerful out in the world, he’s not the boss or the god of our relationship.”

Amelia smirks. “Make sure he knows that.”

“Oh, I will.” I’ll tell him because it’s important. I don’t mind letting him take the lead in some things, but my career is mine.

Several hours and several glasses of champagne later, I have a gorgeous white wedding dress, and Amelia has picked out a muted teal dress that shows off all of her assets.

CHAPTER TEN

Frankie

This is it. The most important day of my life, the day I merge my life with someone else.

I stand at the end of a short aisle inside an adorable chapel on a cliff in Malibu, because of course Damien's assistant found the best venue in the city at the last minute. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as my gaze settles on Damien.

"You ready for this, kid?" Jay stands beside me, looking dapper in his tuxedo. "I hope so because I didn't rent this for nothing."

"I'm ready." I'm more than ready to become Mrs. Wolfe. As we walk down the aisle, excitement and anxiety blend like butterflies in my belly. There he is, looking as handsome as ever. Damien is so elegant wearing a beautiful black and white tuxedo and the closer I get to him, the more I feel out of place, as if I'm an imposter at my own wedding.

His lips part, welcoming me, beckoning me closer.

My heart slams against my chest and with every step I take, it speeds up until it's deafening. Damien takes my hand in his, offering a brief nod to Jay before all of his attention is on me. His hand sends a jolt of electricity straight to my chest and I can hardly breathe.

“You’re gorgeous, my pet,” he whispers in my ear before pulling back, gazing down at me lovingly.

“Thank you. You look pretty handsome yourself.” He looks incredible and he’s all mine. “Let’s get married, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.” His eyes brighten, a spark of excitement in them as he turns to the officiant with a commanding nod, signaling him to begin.

They say most women remember every moment of their wedding day, but the truth is I’m not sure of anything except the words Damien says directly to me. They are heartfelt and so passionate. I’m not sure a woman has ever been loved this thoroughly before.

“Francesca, from the moment we met I’ve been transfixed by you. By your beauty. By your strength.” His grip tightens on my hands. “My desire for you is unmatched by anything I’ve ever felt, and it isn’t just physical desire, it’s an all-consuming need that pulses through my veins. It’s the very essence of my being.”

A dream come true. His words hit just right, like a shot of whiskey warming me from the inside out, chasing away the last of my jitters.

“My solemn vow to you, Francesca, is that I will love you with a passion so intense, it’ll surpass everything else in this world,” Damien says, his voice getting a little rough. “When we’re together, nothing and no one else exists. I promise to be your confidant, your support, your partner, and even your shadow.” His nostrils flare, his jaw tightening for a moment before he continues. His intense gaze burns into mine, and the raw emotion in his voice sends shivers up my spine. “I vow to create a world where it’s just you and me, Francesca. A world where your heart pounds for me, and mine races for you. Where nothing else matters but the passion we share.”

My breath catches at the desire in his voice. My heart races, torn between wanting to give him everything and being overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. But this— this—is what I’ve craved. This kind of devotion. I’m his. Completely.

A tear slips down my cheek, and I let go of his hand to brush it away. Mascara and tears are never a good combo. And no, I’m not the kind of girl who thinks ahead with waterproof makeup.

“My love for you is powerful,” he continues. “Intense. And it demands that same love, that same loyalty in return.” He pauses, his fingers brushing mine. “I am yours, and you are mine, never to be shared with another. With every heartbeat, I choose you, Francesca. With every breath, I claim your soul. You are my lifeblood, my obsession, and I vow never to let anyone come between us. Not in this world, or whatever comes after it.”

He inhales deeply, releasing the breath slowly, his expression softening as he speaks.

“Wow, Damien.” My words come out barely above a whisper, too soft for the magnitude of what he’s just promised. Any doubts I had about belonging here vanish in the wake of his vows. Mine feel small in comparison, but as he holds my face and the officiant speaks, “You may now kiss your bride,” Damien brushes a soft kiss against my lips that feels like forever.

“My wife,” he growls, his voice low and possessive.

“My husband,” I reply.

He takes my hand and, turning toward the small gathering of friends and business associates, he raises our clasped hands in celebration. “Let’s celebrate.”

Neither of us has much family here, and Olivia couldn’t make it for obvious reasons,

but this moment still feels complete. Like it's exactly how it's meant to be.

Damien pulls me back up the aisle, smiling at the well-wishers in attendance. This is my wedding, the happiest day of a woman's life dammit, and I'm going to enjoy every minute.

"Keep it moving," Amelia says as she pushes us the last few feet up the aisle. "You lovebirds have fifteen minutes before photos and then the reception."

"Thank you." I turn and, in an uncharacteristic display of affection, wrap Amelia in a hug. "Thanks for being here for me today, Ames."

"Wouldn't be anywhere else. Especially with those vows." There's something odd about her tone and it doesn't match the smile on her face, but it's my wedding day and I shake it off. "Go. Don't mess up your hair or makeup."

"Yes, ma'am." I salute her just as Damien tugs me into the bridal suite, which is really just a small room with a full-length mirror, pushing me up against the door. "Hello, husband."

"Wife." The word escapes him in a low growl before his lips claim mine, kissing me deeply. His touch is possessive, his kiss commanding, and I'm helpless to do anything but surrender to the rush of pleasure that overwhelms me.

A moan slips from me as I grip the back of his head, pulling him closer because I can't get enough. I tilt my head to the side, offering him more. My neck, my collarbone, even my shoulder. Anything he wants.

Damien's hands attempt to crawl under my dress, but they stop with a frustrated grunt. "This dress is beautiful, and you look gorgeous in it, but right now I want to rip the damn thing in half."

I laugh as my head falls back against the door. “That’ll give you something to think about throughout the reception.” I give his chest a shove, laughing at his disappointed expression.

“Dammit. Okay.” His shoulders drop and he uses his palms to push off the door, putting space between us. “Tonight, you’re mine.”

“I’m already yours.” The look he shoots me is so hot that I swear the lace panties under my dress go up in flames.

For the rest of the evening, it feels as if I’m floating. I can’t say I’ve been this happy since my parents were alive and even though I wish like hell they were here with me today, I lean into the joy and will remember it forever.

“You are absolutely glowing,” Amelia says when she brings me another glass of champagne. “So how does it feel being married to the man of your dreams?”

I shake my head, thinking about it. “Like I’m married to the man of my dreams, but we’ve only been married a few minutes, so I’m sure it’s going to get even better.”

“Damn straight it is.” She leans close. “There are some seriously hot rich guys here, so I’m going to go mingle and you’ll call if you need me.”

“I will.” I watch her saunter over to a cluster of Damien’s business associates with all the confidence and stealth of a jaguar. Those men won’t know what hit them in a few minutes.

Damien joins the group, shaking hands and introducing Amelia formally, which, judging by her expression, surprises her.

“Is this everything you dreamed it would be?” Jay appears at my side, hands shoved

in his pocket as usual.

“Yes. I think it is. It would’ve been great if Mom and Dad were here, but I’m glad you were here to walk me down the aisle, Jay.”

“I got your back, kid. Always.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it and I know you have reservations, but I’m really happy with Damien.”

His expression is stoic, but he tries for a grin. “That’s all that matters.” He squeezes my shoulder and glances across the room where his date is chatting with an elderly couple. “Enjoy this day, Frankie. And congratulations.”

It feels good, this happiness and warmth filling my body. I’m happy. Perfectly happy.

“Francesca, you look stunning.” Jess appears in front of me with a brittle smile. “This dress was made for you.”

“Thank you, Jess, and thank you for everything. I know this isn’t in your job description, but you did a wonderful job putting all of this together. And I have a gift of thanks for you.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m always happy to help.” She looks around before taking a step closer. “Listen Frankie,” then she looks around again. Like she’s got a secret. “I’m only going to say this to you once. Be careful who you trust.” Her eyes bounce on Damien and then to Jay. Then her expression goes blank, and she walks away.

What the actual fuck?

Jess’s words leave me stunned and questioning her motives. Why would she say that

to me on my wedding day? Is she jealous? I wonder if it's the idea that she now has to share Damien with another woman, or if there's something sexual going on between them.

I catch her working the crowd, flashing a polished smile and delivering two-handed shakes like she's running for office. The consummate pro. I follow her every step, my eyes glued to her as I bide my time, hoping she'll wander over to her husband for a dance or at least steal a moment of peace in the chaos of my wedding day.

That's when I realize he isn't here.

Jealousy and rage roar inside my body until I'm vibrating. I grab a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and chug it down in hopes it'll settle my frazzled nerves. It doesn't work and now instead of enjoying myself, I'm worrying that there will be tension between me and Jess which I can't allow because she works for my husband, knows him better than I do.

And that pisses me off.

"Hey," Damien appears in front of me with his brows knitted in concern. "Everything all right?"

I nod. I could tell him what Jess said to me, but I don't. What did she really say? Be careful who you trust. That's good advice and she was smart enough to avoid mentioning Damien by name, so I keep it to myself. "Yeah, just a little overwhelmed," I admit.

"And?" he asks, reading me correctly.

"Kind of missing my mom and dad."

He pulls me in for a hug. "I'm sorry they aren't here, kitten and I wish I could tell you they were watching you from above, but I don't know that so I'll just say that I'm sure they both would be proud of the woman you've become. Beautiful and kind and successful."

It's the most perfect thing he could've said at this moment. "Thank you."

"Let's enjoy one more dance and then get the hell out of here."

"Sounds wonderful." I follow him onto the dance floor and get lost in the music and the lyrics and the feel of Damien's strong arms around me.

The moment the song ends, Damien grasps my hand and drags me out of the reception area where I catch one last glimpse at the ocean before he tucks me into the waiting limousine. "I can't wait another minute." He slams the door behind him before pressing the button to raise the privacy screen. "Finally," he growls and pulls me onto his lap.

"Are we going back to the penthouse?"

"Nope." His hand finds my thigh, sliding all the way up to find my panties soaked. He groans. "Francesca."

"I'm sorry we can't go on a real honeymoon, but I promise, once we catch this guy, I'm all yours." I say, looking up at him. "So, where are we going?"

The limo comes to a stop, and Damien smiles. "We're already here."

"Where?" I glance out, but the night hides everything from view. I close my eyes and focus on the sound of waves crashing in the distance. The scent of salt fills the air. "The beach?"

“A beach house, to be exact.” He steps out of the limo and offers me his hand. “Let’s go, Mrs. Wolfe.”

A thrill runs through me at the sound of my new name. “I really like the sound of that.”

The beach house is perfect—small, intimate, and tucked away, with the rhythmic crash of waves just outside. String lights are woven along the walls, casting a soft, warm glow. The ocean breeze drifts through the open windows, cooling the air and carrying the salty scent of the sea.

“Wow, this is incredible.”

“Nothing but the best for my wife.”

I turn and give him my back. “Want to help me out of this?”

“Not yet. Leave it on.”

I turn back to him and blink in surprise. “Really? It’s kind of cumbersome.”

“I like to see you in it. You’re gorgeous.”

The bedroom radiates romance. A large, low bed sits at the center, draped in crisp white sheets that shimmer in the soft light. Sheer curtains billow at the windows, swaying with the breeze. Fairy lights wrap around the bedposts, creating a cozy glow. Rose petals are scattered across the bed. Something I thought would make me roll my eyes, but here, it feels perfect.

A woven rug stretches beneath the bed, soft under my bare feet, and the wooden floor beneath is worn but warm, shaped by years of beachside living. A small table in the

corner holds an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne, the glasses already waiting. Everything is arranged so deliberately, so perfectly. It's clear that this night has been planned for just us.

Maybe I shouldn't be so mad at Jess. She did an excellent job. This day has been perfect.

So far.

I step further inside, letting the warmth of the room mix with the cool ocean breeze against my skin. The world outside fades, leaving only Damien and me in this perfect little hideaway by the sea.

"Remember in my vows when I said how much I desire you?"

I nod, heart racing.

"I desire your body as well as your mind, and tonight I am claiming them both." Damien's eyes burn with an intensity as he appears over me on the bed. "Lie back against the pillows."

I comply, my heart pounding.

"Good girl. Now hook your arms under your knees and hold yourself open for me."

It takes some maneuvering with my dress, but I obey. "Like this?"

He nods, his gaze devouring the sight of my exposed pussy, glistening with arousal. "Fuck, I love seeing you like this. My bride. Pink, wet and open. Completely vulnerable."

The position feels lewd, but his hungry stare erases any doubt in my mind. He is my husband now. “Damien, please...”

His smile makes me shiver as he positions himself between my spread thighs. “Is this what you want?” he asks in a husky whisper before dragging his tongue along my slit from entrance to clit.

“God, yes,” I gasp.

Never breaking eye contact, he laps at my pussy with slow strokes that make my legs tremble. The heat of his breath, the slick glide of his tongue, is so overwhelming.

I can’t hold back my moans as I watch this gorgeous man devour me like I’m the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted. He teases mercilessly, licking everywhere except where I need it most until I’m trembling and desperate. “Please, Damien!”

Finally, he sucks my clit between his lips, applying an exquisite pressure that has me seeing stars. Mischief dances in his eyes as he watches my reactions, increasing the suction and speed of his tongue as I get closer to the edge.

His tongue is doing wicked things to me, and then he slides a finger—slick and wet—into my ass, and I buck my hips, gasping. It’s too much, but I need more. “Fuck! Yes, just like that,” I’m panting, now tugging at his hair to pull him even closer. Screw the dress. It’s already ruined.

With a particularly hard suck on my clit and an intense thrust of his finger, I shatter. My eyes roll to the back of my head as I arch my back, a strangled scream escaping my lips. “Oh God, yes!” I cry out as waves of pleasure crash over me. But Damien doesn’t let up. He continues his sweet torture until another orgasm builds, slow and relentless. “Damien,” I warn breathlessly.

Suddenly, he pulls back, and I barely have time to register his movements before his tuxedo jacket hits the floor. Next, his shirt joins the pile and then he's tossing his pants with the same force.

"Damien," I breathe.

"Keep your dress on, Francesca," he says, his eyes blazing with raw hunger. "I want my bride to look like a bride when I claim you as my wife."

In one fluid motion, he's inside me, filling me completely. My eyes widen at the sensation, but I bite my lip to stifle the moan that threatens to escape. Damien's hands slide along my thighs, pushing the layers of tulle aside. His touch sears my skin as he begins to thrust, his movements both urgent and powerful.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe, my nails digging into his broad shoulders. "Don't stop," I plead, my body arching to meet his.

I'm so sensitive that every movement feels magnified. When he fucks me like this, like nothing in the world matters, I feel cherished beyond measure. The restraint he's showing, just to please me, is incredible.

"Fuck, Francesca. Mine," he growls.

"Yours," I agree. "Now fuck me, Mr. Wolfe. Give me all you've got."

With a growl that sounds like a wild animal, he pulls out and slams home. Again and again, he pounds into me mercilessly. All I can do is hold on for dear life as he claims his wife, leaving bruises I'll wear proudly later. "Yes! Yes! Damien!"

I clench around him violently as I come, which seems to trigger his own release. With a growl, Damien empties himself deep inside me, hips jerking erratically.

We collapse in a sweaty, sated heap. Damien nuzzles my neck as we catch our breath. “Fuck, Francesca. I think I died for a second there.”

I stroke his hair with a satisfied smirk. “And my pussy brought you back to life? I’m amazing.”

He pulls back, his gaze intense. “You are absolutely incredible. Never forget that.”

Exhausted and sticky with sweat, I ask, “Can I take this dress off now?”

“No. Sleep in it.” His tone is firm, brooking no argument.

I blink, certain I’ve misheard. “What? You can’t be serious.”

His eyes harden. “I am. The dress stays on.”

What the hell? Who makes their wife sleep in her wedding dress? I open my mouth to argue, but something in his expression stops me cold.

This is a side of Damien I haven’t seen before. Not like this. I swallow hard, forcing a smile. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

He nods, seemingly satisfied, and pulls me close. As I lay here wrapped in layers of tulle and lace, I realize I’ve just seen something significant about the man I married today.

And I pray I didn’t make a mistake.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Frankie

Everyone says there's an adjustment period after marriage, getting used to living with another person, the constant compromise and the sharing of space. Maybe it's because we were already living together because of circumstances out of our control or maybe we just fit so perfectly that the adjustment period isn't as stressful as people make it out to be.

For the past week, I've come home from work and Damien is already here. There haven't been many late nights at the office because he's here, greeting me at the door. Maybe the jealousy I felt with Jess and the whole be careful who you trust was just my imagination. Because Damien is definitely not having an affair.

Tonight, when I step inside the house I inhale deeply, letting the scent of garlic and basil fill my nostrils.

"Frankie, is that you?"

I can't help the warmth that fills me with the sound of his voice, and when he stands in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, my whole body heats up. "In the flesh."

"What lovely flesh it is," he shoots back with a teasing grin. "How was work today?"

"Fine," I answer easily, because the last thing I want right now is to talk about work.

The Butcher seems to have gone underground, or he's in the middle of a major cooling off period, which is good for the citizens of Los Angeles, but it also means our chances of catching him are slim. "How was your day?"

"Better now that you're home." Damien's long strides close the gap between us, and before I can react, his lips crash into mine—soft but demanding. His hands cradle my face, a mix of tenderness and ownership, drowning out the moans of pleasure that escape me.

My body lights up almost instantly. Every sweep of Damien's tongue across my lips sends a spark of electricity through me. His touch awakens the darkest, hungriest parts of me and my hands go to his shoulders, tangling in the soft strands at the nape of his neck. Tugging them as I pull him closer.

Too soon, Damien pulls back with a slightly foggy expression. "Hey, Mrs. Wolfe."

"Hey, Mr. Wolfe," I reply with a shaky breath. "What smells so good?"

"I seem to recall you telling me how much you enjoy simple, classic Italian and I've prepared something for you. Garlic basil chicken with a butter tomato sauce."

"You cooked?"

He nods. "I wanted to do something special for you."

There's no way my heart can get more full of this man. Every single day, I love him more. "Every day with you is special, Damien. But I appreciate the effort."

"Do I have time to change? I had to track a witness down at Men's Central and I'd prefer to wash it off before dinner."

“You have plenty of time. Need help?”

“Absolutely, if you’re offering.” Indecision flashes on his face and I laugh. “I’ll get started without you.”

He groans but he doesn’t follow me, which doesn’t surprise me. Damien is a perfectionist with everything he does, and cooking is no exception. He’s impressed me with his own cooking skills, but every night it’s amazing. Something spectacular.

A master of French cuisine graced our table last night with a four-course meal and wine that sent my taste buds spiraling into heaven. The night before? A Greek masterpiece that was nothing short of culinary perfection.

Damien’s been all about the sweet gestures and the romance, but the sex? It keeps getting better and more intense. I find myself buzzing with a constant high that lingers throughout the day. At night, he gives me one more orgasm than I can stand, and then before I leave for work, he gives me another. My body is as happy as my heart.

The shower door slides open and Damien steps inside. “You started without me. I hope you didn’t finish without me.”

I spin to face him, letting the hot water beat against my back. “I was just thinking about the way I rode your face this morning. It got me pretty close.”

His gaze darkens. “You like riding my face?”

“I do.”

“I know. I almost drowned in your sweet juices.”

“Damien,” I moan. His dirty mouth is going to be the death of me, I swear. “So dirty.”

“Need you now, Francesca.”

“Yes.” What else can a woman say when her man wants her so much, he turns into a wild beast?

Before the word is out of my mouth, Damien hitches one of my legs up and over his forearm, sliding deep in one long stroke. We moan simultaneously at the way he feels when he’s buried so deep. “Francesca,” he whispers my name in my ear, guttural and full of need. “I’m gonna fuck you right now and make you come all over me,” he growls, his voice husky with lust.

My body trembles at his filthy words, desire surging within me. Damien knows exactly how to drive me wild.

I nod, unable to say a word.

Damien’s free hand slides up my body, pinching my nipple until it stings. “Tell me you want that, too.”

“I-I-I want that too,” I stammer.

Damien’s eyes reflect his satisfaction as he continues his powerful thrusts, each one driving his cock deeper into me. His hand teases my nipple, pinching them beyond the point of aching before soothing them with his tongue, all the while his wildly delicious strokes push me closer to the edge.

“Fuck Frankie.” That visceral reaction when my body starts pulsing around him feels good. His hips move faster, his cock plunges deeper.

My nipples sting and the sensation shoots down to my belly before spreading to my arms and legs. I moan because I can no longer form words as the first wave of pleasure crawls up my body.

“I feel you, kitten,” he gasps, his breath becoming more labored.

I can’t find the words to respond, lost in all the sensations coursing through me.

And then, with a final, powerful thrust, Damien comes inside me, his body shaking with the force of his climax. I feel him pulsing within me, and a wordless cry escapes my lips as my body reacts in kind.

“Fuck! The things you make me feel, wife.”

I shudder at the possessive way he says wife. “I feel the same.”

After a few minutes, he pulls back, separating our bodies. “I know. Let’s fuel up for round two.”

This is my life, and it is fucking amazing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Frankie

“Hey, are we still on for dinner after work?” Amelia pops her head into the war room, eyes big and bright.

“Yeah, of course.” For the past few weeks, I’ve been in a bubble, a love bubble that’s just me and my husband. If I’m not at work chasing The Butcher—God, I fucking hate that name—then I’m at the penthouse with Damien. Being fed, fucked and doted on. Adored.

I need to get back to my regular life, which means hanging out with friends and coworkers. Damien occupies my time, and I love it, but our little bubble isn’t the real world. Besides, I know Amelia is hungry for the details of my married life.

She raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Because last time you said we’d hang out, your husband had a special surprise and you really didn’t want to disappoint him.” Her tone tells me everything about what she thinks about that, and honestly, I don’t want to talk about it.

“I’m sure.” I shake my head. “It’s supposed to be a good thing when your husband wants to spend time with you. Right?” I don’t know why she’s getting all bent out of shape about a wife spending time with her man.

“Of course, it’s just...odd. That’s all.” Amelia waves her hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about me. Maybe I’m just missing you.”

We both know that's not all it is, but I don't call her out on it. "Birria nachos tonight. On me?"

"Sounds good."

Amelia leaves me alone in the room and my gaze wanders once again to the faces of the victims I haven't been able to get justice for. These men haunt me day in and day out. "I'm going to get justice for all of you. I promise."

At least I hope I will, but it's been weeks, and The Butcher is silent, which means the only thing we have to go on is whatever evidence we already have, and that's not much.

The person who did these unspeakable things to these men deserves to be behind bars and if I can't get that for them, what the fuck am I doing here? It's a question I usually pose to Jay who is—once again—missing in action. I call him to find out where he is, but it rolls right over to voicemail. Six times now, just today.

He worries me. I hope he doesn't have a terminal illness or something equally bad. Then again, he's still with Cassandra and she might have something unspeakable, and he doesn't want to tell me. Not that it's any of my business.

When my shift is over, I leave it all behind and go in search of Amelia. I'm ready for birria nachos and a few ice-cold beers. Maybe what I need is girl talk and spend time with my friend. Maybe clearing my mind will help me see things I haven't seen yet.

"Frankie!" Amelia is leaving her office just as I round the corner in the precinct. We both spot Damien at the same time. Her shoulders fall in disappointment, but I can't help the excitement that bubbles up inside of me when I see him.

"Hey babe. What are you doing here?"

Damien greets me with a kiss so hot it melts the bones in my legs. I kiss him back with all the longing I have for him. “I’m here for you, of course.”

“Me? I wasn’t expecting you,” I tell him. “Amelia and I are going out for dinner and girl talk.”

The light in his eyes dims and instantly I feel terrible. What kind of wife turns down her husband who shows up at work to surprise her? “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had plans. I got us last minute reservations at Seaside by Marco.”

Seaside by Marco is only the newest, hottest and the hippest restaurant in Los Angeles. They specialize in seafood dishes from around the globe and everyone who’s anyone is waiting to get a table there. Damien got us a table. “You did?”

He nods. “I should have called you ahead of time,” he begins with a sincere expression. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to surprise you.”

“It’s okay. You know I love surprises.” I take his hand in mine, brushing a kiss to his knuckles. “Just let me reschedule with Amelia, okay?”

His nod is slow and unsure, and I feel worse. “Just a few minutes, I promise.”

Amelia is shaking her head as I approach her. “You’re not going out with me.” It’s not a question, just a disappointing fact.

“He got us reservations at Seaside by Marco,” I say, trying to sound excited, but I see the disgust on her face.

She rolls her eyes. “Impressive, but don’t you see what he’s doing?”

I frown. “Being incredibly romantic?”

Amelia's sigh is well past annoyed. "Sure, it's romantic. It's also incredibly controlling. You see him doing all these wonderful things for you, but I see a man who's holding on to you so tight that you can't have a life of your own."

"That's not true," I insist.

"It is," she snaps, her gaze darting over my shoulder to Damien. "You couldn't work out with me last week. Why?"

"You're ridiculous. Damien upgraded the home gym, so I'd be safe." I don't love the home gym but it's a thoughtful gesture and I am grateful. "Fine, maybe he's hanging on a little tight after my house was burned down but he's just worried."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's all it is. Worry." Amelia takes a step back. "You know, I always thought it was bullshit when people say you lose your friends when they get married, but I've tried to spend time with you and it's obvious to me now you just don't want that."

"Ames," I begin, but she doesn't want to hear it.

"I'll see you around, Frankie. Or not. Enjoy Seaside by Marco." With that parting shot, she brushes past me and goes back into her office, slamming the door behind her.

I want to go after her, badly. Amelia is my friend, and I don't want her to feel like I don't value our friendship but I'm a newlywed and it makes sense that I want to spend more time with Damien right now. Later, I promise myself. I'll make it up to her in the morning.

I hope there's a path to forgiveness as I make my way back to Damien.

“Everything all right? That looked intense.”

“It will be all right,” I say but I’m not ready to talk about it. “Let’s go. Am I dressed okay?”

His gaze rakes over me as heavy and intense as a caress. “No, but I have something for you.” He hands me a bag that has some heft to it.

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to keep buying me things, Damien. I love you for you.”

“I know and I love you, but I enjoy spoiling you. The look of surprise you get never fails to make my cock hard. I can help you change if you like?”

I laugh at his jumping brows. “We are not having sex inside this precinct.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” he says with a teasing smile.

“It’s not,” I insist. “I’ll be back soon.”

The dress is perfect. It’s nothing more than a thin layer of teal silk, but somehow it hugs all of my curves and hides the evidence of too many carbs throughout my workday. The nude pumps are beautiful, and I feel sexy as hell as I rush out to meet Damien.

“Damn Francesca, you are stunning.” He takes my hand, practically yanking me from the precinct. “Half of me just wants to take you home so no one else can see you in that dress.”

I laugh. “And the other half?”

“Wants the entire fucking city to see you and know you’re mine.”

Mine. The word is so possessive. So hot and searing, like he’s branding me in a thousand different ways.

The entire night is magical, from the sea-themed restaurant and the courteous waitstaff who treat us like royalty. The tasting menu is mouthwatering. Every salty, brine-y bite is something I’ll remember forever. “Wow, this is fantastic.”

Damien’s eyes sparkle with amusement and something darker. “What’s fantastic is watching you enjoy good food so immensely. The sounds you make are giving me ideas for later.”

That look sets my body on fire. “In that case, I can’t wait for later.”

His lips curl up. “Neither can I. Watching you in that dress has been torturing me all night.”

“Good.” I lean in with a mischievous smile on my face. “It’s so slinky I can’t wear anything under it. Nothing, Damien.”

His gaze is jet black and full of lust. “Check please,” he growls at the first server he sees.

“Right away, sir.”

Ten minutes later we’re in the car rushing back to the penthouse. My thighs are squeezed so tight when the car slams to a stop in the parking spot reserved for the penthouse. We both jump out like two horny teenagers.

Damien’s hands are all over me inside the elevator, sliding up and down my waist

and hips before his hands settle on my ass. “Love this fucking dress.”

“Me too. Thank you, my sweet husband.” I wonder if I’ll ever get tired of saying that. Doubtful.

His kisses make me melt and too soon, the elevator doors slide open and we’re inside the penthouse. It’s been a perfect night with an amazing dinner. Now it’s time for dessert.

As if the universe has a twisted sense of humor, Damien’s phone rings. I keep my expression carefully blank because I know a call this time of night can very well be a business emergency, which means dessert has to wait. He answers the phone and then mouths the words, “I’ll be right up,” to me.

I nod and make my way up to our bedroom, slowly undressing because I’m hopeful Damien’s call will finish quickly, and he’ll catch me undressing. Ten minutes later, I’m totally naked and waiting on top of the plush bedding.

And waiting.

And waiting some more.

He’s not coming.

I know the smart thing would be to just grab some pajamas and go to bed, but I’m not that woman. I’m a detective who always needs answers and right now I just want to make sure everything is okay.

And he’s not talking to another woman.

My foot hits the bottom step when I hear the strain in Damien’s voice. “No,” he

hisses. “You need to stay the fuck away.”

Stay away? I have no clue who he could be talking to, but I’m instantly wary. So many things race through my mind, the first being Jess’ words on my wedding day and the next thing is even more worrying.

The Butcher of Beverly Hills.

“No, I don’t give a fuck. Just stay the hell away from me and my family.”

Family? Does he mean me or his sister Olivia? I stand there, rooted in place with my breath caught in my chest, eavesdropping on my husband like a jealous wife.

“If I see you around, you’ll regret it.” His words come out on a snarl and when he turns, he freezes in shock at the sight of me. “I thought I told you to wait for me upstairs.”

“I waited, for a long damn time. And then I thought maybe you forgot about me or maybe something was wrong. Looks like I was right.”

He shakes his head. “No, that was nothing.”

“Liar!” Now I’m angry. “Who was that, Damien? Who are you telling to stay away from you and your family?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose, the way he does when he’s forced to deal with an issue he doesn’t want to. “Francesca, please. It’s none of your damn concern.”

Those words piss me off, but they also hurt. “I’m your wife and it’s none of my concern ? Wow, it’s good to know where I stand.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” he roars. “We’re having this conversation because once again, you don’t trust me. What the fuck do I have to do to get you to trust me, Francesca?”

“Tell me the truth for starters. Is that really so difficult to ask a husband to do?”

“You’re jealous,” he accuses.

“No,” I shake my head insistently. “I’m not jealous Damien, I’m worried. You’re secretive and sneaking around, telling someone to stay away. Most women might think you’re having an affair, but I am not most women. You’re my husband. What happened to being my partner, my confidant?”

Something flashes in his eyes, but it’s gone quickly. “That’s what I love about you, kitten. You’re always practical. Caring.”

I shake my head. “I love you too, but your compliments won’t get you out of this. Not this time. You know what I think? I think the killer is playing games with you, and that you think you’re keeping me safe by not involving me and that’s fucking stupid.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. He’s going to set a trap for you, and I won’t get to you in time because you don’t trust me enough to involve me in what’s going on, damn you!” My legs shake as the truth crashes down around me. “Oh my God, you don’t trust me.” I look around and make it to the sofa before my legs give out.

“Francesca, that’s not true.”

“It is true. It’s my job to catch this guy and you think I can’t do it. You don’t trust me; you don’t believe in me.” My heart breaks in two at the realization.

“Are you serious?” he yells. “You are the most capable woman I’ve ever known. Of course you’ll catch this jerk. I believe in you. I can’t believe you said that.” He runs one hand and then the other through his hair before exhaling deeply.

“Then tell me who called.”

A storm brews in his hazel eyes as he shakes his head. “I can’t.”

“Exactly.” I rise and shake my head in disbelief.

“This is absurd. I’m heading to the office where I can find some peace.”

Tears form in my eyes, and I shake my head. “Well, if The Butcher comes after you, just know that I love you.”

Damien shakes his head at me, furious as hell, but he doesn’t say a word. He grabs his keys and wallet and storms out of the penthouse, leaving an angry silence in his wake.

I stomp back up the stairs. I can’t believe I gave up dinner with Amelia for this shit.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Frankie

After a night that felt more like a wrestling match with insomnia than actual sleep, I stumble out of bed and drag myself through my morning routine. The clock's mocking me, a reminder that waking up without Damien's arms wrapped around me is a special kind of hell.

I miss the warmth of his chest pressed against my back, the steady rhythm of his heart that usually lulls me into a blissful slumber. It's infuriating, really. I'm bone-tired and seething, but a quick shower later, I've got a plan.

My stomach rumbles nervously as I take the elevator up to the executive offices of Wolfe Industries. The sleek office building is intimidating as hell, but I stuff it down the same way I do when I have to question the alibi of a Hollywood studio executive or the child of a legendary celebrity. I swallow the nerves and focus on my mission, which helps me stay calm.

I smile when I spot Jess even though her words from the wedding are stamped on my mind. Be careful who you trust. I'm always careful, but her words linger and make me question everything and everyone. "Hi, Jess. Is he in?"

She looks cautious, but she gives a slight nod, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "He is. Go on in."

I nod and take a deep breath in front of his door, exhaling as I grab the handle and

twist it slowly. Damien is inside with his gaze on a bank of screens, looking every bit the god of the tech world everyone thinks he is.

“I don’t have time now, Jess.” He doesn’t even look up and I take in the sight of him, beautiful and commanding and so in charge of his world.

“You want me to come back later?” I nibble my bottom lip, something I often do when I’m nervous and I don’t like it. This is my husband, the man I pledged my life to, a man who I shouldn’t be nervous around.

He blinks quickly before shaking his head. His gaze flicks from the screens to me. “Francesca. What are you doing here?” His gaze is dark and intense when it settles on me. “Is everything all right?”

“No.” I fold my arms across my chest and watch him carefully. “I’m not okay, Damien. I don’t like fighting with you.”

He sighs and stands from the buttery soft office chair. “I don’t like fighting with you either.”

“I was worried about you.” I hate that I sound weak, something I’ve worked hard my entire adult life to avoid. “I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

His lips tug into a reluctant expression of satisfaction. “Me too,” he says, wrapping me in a warm hug. “Fuck, Francesca, I’m sorry.”

I bury my face in his chest. “I’m sorry too. I trust you but I’m worried about what this guy might do to you.”

His chin rests on top of my head. “I trust you Francesca, of course I do. I never would have married you if I didn’t and I need you to know I wasn’t talking to The Butcher

last night.”

That provides me with a sense of relief but I’m also more curious than ever about who he was talking to last night. “Good. That’s good. I’m glad.”

“Between the wedding and things with Olivia, I’m a little stressed out, I guess. But I love you kitten, and I don’t ever want to fight with you.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “I don’t want to fight with you either, but I want you to be safe. I need you to be safe because my biggest nightmare is that the killer will make a move on you, and I’ll be too far away to save you.”

“My little protector,” he growls and fits his lips to mine. The kiss starts off hot as fuck and I melt into his broad chest and inhale his expensive masculine scent.

“I’m sure it goes against your toxic masculinity but it’s my job to keep you safe. I’ve searched high and low for a man like you, and there is no fucking way in hell that I’ll let some twisted fucker take you from me.” I mean that with my whole heart.

“You won’t have to because I’m not going anywhere, my pet.” His arms tighten around me.

“Good. I really am sorry about last night. I love you and I worry.”

“I know and I’m stressed and taking it out on you. I’m sorry too, kitten.” His lips descend on mine once again, soft and insistent. He licks my mouth, teasing me until I open up for him, giving him access to whatever he wants. A slow moan escapes and Damien kisses me deeper, with more intensity. “It won’t happen again.”

“It will,” I laugh. “And that’s okay. We’ll figure it out just like we did now.”

He growls and kisses me again. "I hate sleeping without you curled into my side."

"Me too. I slept like shit," I tell him honestly. "Now I get why they say you shouldn't go to bed angry."

"Then we won't. That's a promise."

I hug Damien so tightly I hear his heart thumping in my ear. It's strong and powerful just like him. Steady and comforting.

"Hungry?"

I nod against his chest. "I could eat."

We order some delivery, and I spend an hour with Damien inside his office, eating breakfast and making up for the events of last night. He still doesn't tell me what the call last night was about, but I don't push it, now isn't the time, instead I enjoy having breakfast with my husband.

Everything else can wait until later.

"You spoil me," I tell him and pat my full belly. "Thank you for breakfast."

"I'll spend the rest of my life spoiling you, Francesca. I wish I had time to make up with you properly."

I laugh but it sounds more like a giggle even to my own ears. "I do too, but that's what tonight is for. Tonight, at the penthouse, Damien. Just me and you."

"I'll hold you to that." His mouth finds mine again and I swear that every single kiss he lays on me pulls me under. By the time he pulls back, there's a fine sheen of sweat

on my forehead and my back. “Until tonight, Mrs. Wolfe.”

I shiver. “Yeah, until tonight.”

Damien walks me to the door but his phone rings when he pulls it open. “Have a good day at work, Francesca.”

“I will. Stay safe.” I watch him for another long minute, admiring his beauty when he answers the phone, easily slipping into boss mode. Feeling proud of my man and satisfied with how we left things, I leave the office and nearly slam into Jess on my way to the elevator.

“Mrs. Wolfe. Is everything all right?” Her smile is professional, the same one I bet she uses with everyone who comes through this office.

“Yes. Just a small disagreement between newlyweds.”

“It happens,” she offers with a sympathetic look in her eyes. The look darkens and she steps inside the elevator with me, standing so close I can smell her expensive perfume. “I shouldn’t have ambushed you at the wedding the way I did,” she begins. “But if you want to know the truth, the real truth about everything, I suggest you ask your partner. Jay.”

“Jay? What’s this got to do with Jay?”

She nods. “Ask him. He has a lot of answers that might surprise you. Starting with your home,” she says before she hits the button and steps off the elevator. “Good luck.”

Good luck? Who the hell drops a bomb like that and then says good luck as if I’m going to audition to be an extra on Law & Order ? My mind is racing by the time my

feet hit the marble floors of the lobby and it's so loud I can't think of anything else when I reach my car.

I think of all the recent incidents with Jay that I was willing to brush off, but further examination paints them as suspicious. His mysterious appointments are at the top of the list, but also vanishing during the questioning of Laurel Kinney. None of it makes sense and it didn't make sense at the time, but Jay is like family, and I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

And let's not forget that he was at my house when it burned down.

That's a thought too far but I have a full head of steam worked up by the time I enter the precinct. I'm not in the mood to bullshit with my coworkers the way I usually do because once again, I'm on a mission, this time I need to find my partner, my surrogate father and find out what the fuck he's hiding from me.

"Frankie." His face lights up the way it always does when he sees me. "What's up?" He notices my dark expression immediately and gets to his feet inside the war room. "Is it Damien?"

I shake my head and watch Jay carefully. He looks genuinely worried about me or Damien. I'm not sure but I need the truth. I can't afford to just wait and see. "Damien is fine," I sigh and take my seat, folding my hands on top of the desk. "I need to ask you something."

"Sure kid. Shoot."

"How did you know about the fire at my house?"

His brows dip. "It came across on the radio and I rushed there after recognizing your address."

That makes sense. “Why were you listening to the radio?” Neither of us was on shift that night. “I mean, I figured you’d be cuddled up with Cassandra.”

He shrugs. “Even a stud like me needs a night off, Frankie. What’s this about?”

I let out a frustrated sigh and keep my gaze on Jay, studying his face. “This is about lies, Jay. About me figuring out who else is keeping vital information from me.” I lean forward and arch one of my brows. “What are you hiding Jay?”

“Shit, Frankie, we all have secrets.”

That much is true. I have my own secrets that I keep for various reasons, but those secrets don’t overlap into my regular life. “Okay, what secrets are you keeping from me that I need to know about?”

He studies me, doing that quick darting back and forth thing that suspects often wear in an interrogation when they’re trying to figure out what we know. “Who’s in your head?”

“Right now? You Jay. I have a lot of thoughts in my head right now and I don’t like them. Not one fucking bit.” I stare at him until his resolve cracks.

“Damien talked, didn’t he?”

“It should’ve been you,” I answer instead of confirming or denying anything.

“I didn’t think he’d ever tell you. Shit Frankie, it’s not about keeping secrets. It’s about keeping you safe.”

I shake my head. “You know, I’m really starting to hate that fucking word, Jay. It’s not your job to keep me safe unless we’re out in the field. I expect you to have my

back but not lie to me.”

“It’s not a real lie, just a lie of omission.” He tosses his pen across the desk, watching as it rolls off the desk and falls to the floor. “I’ve known Wolfe for a while. He’s one of the biggest names in the city.”

“So, this entire fucking time you’ve known that he was at Hope House? Known that his life was in danger, and you never said a fucking word?” My heart is stuck in my throat thinking about all the ways Jay has fucked this investigation. “You created months of useless work for us and why? We could have saved Zeke!”

He’s shaking his head like I’m just being some emotional woman, and it pisses me off. “Whoever this killer is, he was always gonna go after Zeke.” His words are so casual, so fucking nonchalant that it drives me crazy.

“Do you know who it is Jay?” I hold my breath in anticipation of his answer. Please don’t let him know who the killer is. Don’t let our entire relationship which expands half of my life, be a lie. If there’s any real justice in this universe, that won’t be the case.

“Do I know who’s out here dropping bodies around my city?” He laughs angrily. “How the fuck can you ask me that, Frankie?”

“What am I supposed to think, Jay? All this time you pretended like you only knew Damien from the press. You discouraged me from dating him, hell you acted like you hated him when you knew him, perhaps better than I do!” I shake my head. “Is there another reason you didn’t want me to date him?” My heart is galloping like a racehorse. “Well?”

“Yeah, because he’s rich and those guys think the laws don’t apply to them.”

For the first time in my life, I know Jay is lying to me. “What does Damien have to do with this?”

“Nothing, I swear. I mean, I don’t know other than he also lived at Hope House.” His eyes are begging me to believe him, but my conscience is telling me not to believe anyone as easily as I did five minutes ago. “I didn’t keep anything from you that would impact the case.”

“Except you did because you know who was staying at Hope House and you probably have a good idea why those men are dead.”

“There are about fifty different reasons those men could be dead considering all the shit those kids got up to, but nothing specific comes to mind Frankie. I swear.”

I want to believe him. He’s been at my side since my entire world came crashing down. Twice. But right now, all I see is a liar and that’s the last thing I want or need to deal with. “I need some space.” I stand and shake my head. “I need to get out of here.”

“Come on Frankie, let’s talk about this.”

“No Jay, there’s nothing to talk about. You know I hate lying and you’ve been lying to me for months.” Possibly years.

“I did it to protect you. You’re pissed at me and rightly so, but I hope you save up some of that anger for your husband who also lied to you.”

It’s a truth that’s been kicking around in the back of my mind for a few hours that I’ve been reluctant to address. Damien lied to me too and I’m not ready to face that just yet.

I leave the precinct and walk around the city to clear my mind. When that doesn't work, I take a drive up PCH and hope the shoreline does for me what nothing else has been able to.

Give me clarity.

Give me guidance.

Ignoring calls for six hours isn't the adult way to handle things but right now I have to look out for myself since no one else does.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Damien

Where the fuck is she? I pace the length of the penthouse, wondering where Francesca could be. Jay called me hours ago and said she flew out of the precinct in a rage when he told her about our connection.

I verbally tore him a new asshole before he reassured me, he didn't tell her everything. It's small comfort considering I don't know where the hell she is or what's going through her mind, but I need to know.

I don't live my life leaving unknowns lingering. I need every loose end tied up and burned so they never unravel again. Right now, Jay is a big fucking loose end, but getting rid of him would create more problems than it solves. "Fucking Jay." Why did he have to open his fucking mouth?

More importantly, why did she ask him about any of this today?

It's a question I need an answer to, and fast. The penthouse door opens and I'm there in an instant. "Francesca, thank God. I was so worried about you." I gather her in my arms and hold her close. "Where the hell have you been?"

She slowly pulls out of my hold and her gaze slams into mine. "I've been out, Damien. Or isn't that allowed anymore, either?"

Whoa. "What the fuck is going on?"

“Nothing.” That one word is so heavy it literally weighs her down as she tosses herself onto the sofa. “It’s been a long, terrible fucking day Damien and I just want to relax if that’s all right with you.”

Shit, this is worse than I thought. Frankie being angry and defiant is one thing, but this defeated version is almost unbearable.

I need her to get away from the city. Away from any reminders of my alter ego and the secrets all around her. “I’m sorry you had a bad day,” I tell her and drop beside her, holding her until all the tension leaves her body.

“Yeah, thanks.” Slowly, her breathing returns to normal and she gives me more of her weight. “Why are you home so early?”

“A night of sleeping without you has turned me into a grouchy bastard, apparently.” It’s an easy half-lie that should make her forget some of her suspicions.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she whispers.

“Me too. Want to talk about what’s bothering you?”

“Not at all,” she replies quickly. “I don’t want to talk about anything right now.”

Good. My plan is taking shape, but I need to get her to relax enough to talk to me and spill her secrets. “Let’s get away for a few days.”

She laughs and the sound is slightly crazed. “No offense Damien but I’m not really in the mood for a luxury getaway.” She groans. “I can’t even believe I just said that.”

“Good, because while this place is beautiful, it’s not exactly a luxury vacation. I promise.”

“I don’t know, Damien. I can’t keep running from my problems.”

“Why the hell not?” I stroke her hair, grinning as she burrows deeper into me. “Never underestimate the power of running away. I’ve done it a few times myself.”

She freezes and looks back at me over her shoulder. “You have?”

“Yeah. Right after I started my company when everything felt like it was spiraling out of control. And when I realized my sister might never get better.” It’s all true, and it’s the first time I’ve opened up about it.

“Did it help?”

“Yes, and no. It gave me clarity to figure things out, but actually doing it was still tough as hell.”

She laughs. “Are you running for office? That was a perfect non-answer.”

“No,” I chuckle. “Maybe I’m not explaining it well, but I think it helped. It’ll just be you and me, Francesca. No one else—just us and God’s green Earth.” I can almost hear the wheels turning in her mind, so I give her time to come to her own conclusion.

“Nature? Yeah, okay. Let’s go.” She pushes up and turns to face me. “Thank you, Damien. I’m not sure if it’ll help, but a few days away can’t hurt, right?”

That is what I’m hoping for. This time away will help me figure out what’s going on in Frankie’s head. She is getting closer to the truth than she realizes, and I need to solidify our bond. When or if the time comes, I need her to know where her loyalty lies. “I think it’s going to change everything.”

Her eyes light up with hope, but there's a flicker of uncertainty that doesn't escape my notice. If this trip doesn't help, it could cause trouble for her. She's struggling with trust in her partner, the man who's always been like a father to her. She doesn't know who she can rely on. Except me.

Everything is falling into place perfectly, and I'm grateful I had the help clean and stock the cabin earlier this week. I hadn't planned on needing it so soon, but now that I do, it feels like a stroke of luck. We'll have everything we need for a while, and if I have my way, maybe even longer.

While Francesca packs her bags, I text the property manager to let her know to send the small staff on vacation for at least a week. I'll cover all expenses. No interruptions. Just the two of us.

Frankie packs a few bags, one filled with her laptop and work files, along with a couple more for clothes and essentials. I find her bouncing on her heels beside the front door. "I'm ready."

I laugh. "An hour ago, I had to beg you to go, and now you are itching to leave."

"I had some time to think, and I believe you're right. This is exactly what I need."

"Let's go then." I grab Frankie's bags and the fob for the sleek black SUV.

As we head outside, she glances at me with a curious expression. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," I reply, keeping my tone light.

Her eyes narrow. "A surprise? Really? Do I look like I need a surprise right now?"

“Yep. You’ll love it.”

We hit the road, and the ride is comfortably silent, occasionally broken by a song or two. We are both lost in our thoughts until the cabin comes into view. I decide to keep the destination a secret for now. I want her to experience the surprise with no negative thoughts creeping in.

I push the fob that opens the gate and Frankie’s eyes go wide. “Wow. Is this your cabin?”

I laugh. “No, it’s our cabin. Do you like it?”

“It’s gorgeous.” She leans forward to take in the details of the three-story cabin made from actual logs. It’s modern but with a rustic flair and surrounded by greenery. “Damien, this place is amazing.” Her gaze locks onto mine, and while there’s awe in her eyes, I can sense something else. Something wary.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, gaze still on the cabin as we approach. “I was just thinking that I didn’t even realize you had this property. Not that I need to know, but it caught me off guard. That’s all.”

The more she doubts now, the more she’ll believe me when I need her to. “I’m happy to show you my real estate portfolio, Francesca. This isn’t a secret. There are just too many properties to think about. Unless I need to bring my beautiful wife to one.”

“Good answer.” For the first time since she arrived back at the penthouse, she seems lighter. Less burdened by betrayal. But it doesn’t last long, a few minutes unpacking and the darkness settles over her again.

I want to ask her about it, but I need that darkness, that distrust to fester. It's cruel, I'm aware, but it's also necessary. "Why don't you go wash the day off you while I get dinner started?"

"You're cooking again?"

"Let's say yes because that's far more impressive than saying the chef prepared a bunch of easy to heat meals for us."

Her lips stretch into an easy grin and then a small laugh erupts. "Yes, to the shower and I'm still impressed by you, Damien." The love shining in her eyes tells me she means it.

Good. That makes everything easier.

"What smells so good?"

I'll never tire of the tone she uses when someone is making her food. My eyes close and I inhale deeply. "That hint of lavender and vanilla says it's you."

"Charmer."

I turn and find her with her head tilted as she studies me. I look at her in return, taking in the sight of her long, shapely legs in the denim blue shorts with a silk camisole. She looks effortlessly beautiful and her damp, slightly messy hair completes the look. "What's going on behind those beautiful brown eyes?"

"Everything," she admits. "Work. Lifelong friendships. The usual." Her deadpan delivery is like a punch to the gut.

"I'm an excellent listener," I tell her and pour us both a glass of wine. "If you're up

for talking. Or venting if that's your thing."

"Wow, look who's auditioning for husband of the year."

I wiggle my brows and slide the glass across the table. "I have to audition?"

"Don't worry, I have it on good authority you'll make it to the top spot." She holds the glass by the stem before taking several large sips, ending with a satisfying sigh. She watches me carefully. Too carefully.

"What's on your mind, Francesca?"

"Everything," she admits quietly. "You and Jay know each other. Like, know. From before." It's not a question or even an accusation, just a statement of fact. "Neither of you said a word to me and now I wonder who, if anyone, I can trust." She has a distant look in her eyes, as if she can't see me or anyone else, lost in the chaos of mistrust.

"Jess told me to be careful who I trust, and then she told me Jay should be at the top of the list of people I can't trust. I mean, what the fuck is that about?"

My brows dip and I make a mental note to have a conversation with Jess about her loyalty.

"Jess told you that?"

"Yeah, but why? What does she know that you or I don't know?"

"Hold on, Frankie. Jess, my assistant, told you to distrust your partner you've known for years, and you believe her?"

“I don’t know. Everyone is keeping secrets now. I don’t know who I can trust. Jay admitted to knowing you before this whole Butcher shit started. Why would he lie to me?”

“What do you want me to say, Francesca?” I take another sip, giving myself time to come up with an answer. “Jay and I don’t know each other, not how you’re thinking. He was a beat cop twenty years ago when I lived at Hope House.” Give her as much of the truth as I can now so that when I give her the rest later, she’ll accept it.

“Why would he need to protect me from that?”

Good question and I don’t have an answer. “You should probably ask him. I have no clue how cops think.”

“I’m serious, Damien.”

“So am I. I have no idea what’s going on in your head right now except that a bunch of other people have gotten in your head about me. My wife, whom I love, the seasoned detective, has decided the best option is to doubt me.”

“I’m not doubting you! I’m just asking questions.”

“There’s nothing for you to doubt.”

She glares. “That’s not an answer.”

“No, it’s not because I don’t have an answer, Francesca. Why are other people trying to come between us? I have no fucking clue. I know I love you and I trust you. I just wish you’d do the same.”

“I will,” she begins. “I want to. Tell me who you were on the phone with the other

night.”

That’s an easy lie. “A business associate. He wants more money for a deal we’ve already closed, and he threatened to come by and expose me if I didn’t give him more.” I keep my expression carefully neutral. Frankie is great at reading people, but so far, she hasn’t been able to read me.

“What’s his name?”

“Jacob Sandusky.” I choose a name I know should be familiar enough for her to buy my story.

“The nepo-baby from the tech world with the drug problem?”

I nod once. “Don’t forget the hooker problem.”

“Sex worker,” she shoots back. “Why are you in business with him?”

“Because he had a controlling stake in a company that provided something vital for my operations.”

She studies me closely, searching for any signs of half-truths or outright lies. “Hmm.”

“I don’t like it when you doubt me, Francesca. I’ve given you no reason.” My tone is low and commanding, and she notices.

She sits up taller in her chair, her gaze glued to my own. “You’ve kept things from me.”

I have. “Only to keep you safe.”

“Not only for that reason,” she shoots back.

“Mostly,” I reply and let a slow smile spread across my face.

Her expression matches mine.

“Let’s not fight anymore, Frankie. I’m willing to forgive you.”

She laughs. “Forgive me?”

“Yes,” I nod and turn down the oven, crossing the kitchen until I’m right in her face.

“Give me a good reason to forgive you.”

She loves the challenge I present, and the shadows in her eyes vanish as she rises to her feet, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “I think it’s you who needs to earn my forgiveness.”

“You first.” I tease her with a fiery kiss that makes my pulse pound and my cock harden behind my zipper, pulling back just as things start to heat up.

Frankie lets out a half-moan, half-whimper. “Tease.”

“You have to earn it,” I whisper. “Show me how much you want me, Francesca. How much you crave me. Need me. Show me how badly you want to fuck me.”

Her eyes glaze over, and I can feel her body trembling. “You know I do.”

“And now I need you to show me.”

Her gaze lights up with excitement, her skin flushing as she begins to reveal exactly what I want. I make sure that I’m the only one she sees, the only one she trusts for the

rest of the night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Frankie

Damien has been gone most of the morning and I have a feeling he's planning something special. Again. I've got to hand it to him. The guy knows how to sweep a girl off her feet. A remote cabin in the woods isn't exactly my idea of a cozy couple's retreat, but being alone with him, away from the noise and chaos of the city, has a certain appeal.

The further we are from civilization, the more the fog in my mind starts to lift. I can finally take a deep breath and think clearly for the first time in what feels like ages.

It's the reason I dug out my laptop to go over the case materials with fresh eyes. Often, it's the fastest way to find something we missed during the heat of the investigation and right now, with a few days' distance from the facts of The Butcher's crimes, my eyes are damn fresh.

I start at the beginning with Hope House. The key to why these men were killed is buried there. Whatever this vendetta is, the answers, as well as clues to the remaining victims, are hiding in that place. I've had theories brewing for a while, but without solid evidence to back them up. So I spend the day searching through records, following leads that were too faint to see before.

I go over the police blotters from the years the victims lived at Hope House. Then I expand the search, going back five years before and five years after they left, and what I find leaves me cold.

The police were regular visitors at Hope House for years—no surprise for a place full of traumatized orphans. Fights broke out constantly among the kids. Most didn't warrant anything other than a report that an officer had stopped by and given them a talking-to. But something jumps out at me now, a detail I should've caught long ago.

Hawkins.

Just Hawkins. No first name. No initials. That's probably why I missed it initially. Hawkins is a common enough name, and I didn't make the connection. I wasn't looking for him, I trusted Jay. So, when I skimmed these blotters early on, I just saw the name and moved on. It never occurred to me it could be Jay.

But now, scanning report after report, his presence is unmistakable. Jason Hawkins. He was there, and I failed to notice.

How the hell did I miss this? I lean back in my chair, staring at his name until it blurs. The oversight seems impossible now. If he visited the house hundreds of times during his years in uniform, he must have some idea what might've sparked this killing spree. He has to.

"Son of a bitch," I whisper to myself. Jay's been lying to me about the entire case. But why?

I need caffeine for this. In the kitchen, I grab a mug and pour coffee, letting the aroma fill the room. It doesn't settle the knot in my stomach, but the warmth helps me focus.

Back at my laptop, I zero in on the years when all the victims were at Hope House together, including Damien and Olivia. Four summers where their lives overlapped. Three of the other potential victims were there during those same summers. As I examine the reports more closely, a pattern emerges.

At first, the boys fought often, but nothing worse than a few black eyes or busted lips. Then something shifted. The fights became more frequent, more brutal—broken teeth, split skin. Yet Jay never arrested anyone. He never even called Child Services. Not once.

The question pounds in my head. Why wouldn't he report any of this when it was clear the situation was deteriorating?

Money. It always comes back to money. People kill, lie, and cover things up because of it. Back then, Jay was going through divorce number two—two alimony payments bleeding him dry. Maybe that's why he looked the other way.

But who was paying him?

I pull up financial records, corporation filings, anything that might lead to answers. And what I uncover leaves me with a sick feeling in my gut. This wasn't just Jay ignoring a few fights. This was corruption—ongoing, blatant, and it stinks. "What the fuck, Jay?" I whisper, shaking my head.

The trail leads back to the corporation that owned Hope House, but there's no information about them anywhere. It's like the company never existed.

The cabin's silence weighs on me as I stare into my now-cold coffee. My partner. His name was all over those reports, and I didn't even notice it. I didn't even think twice. Why would I?

Needing a fresh cup, I head to the kitchen. My hands shake as I pour the coffee, and I set the pot down harder than I mean to.

I need to get into his finances, figure out who was paying him. And my father's reports. The thought makes me sick to my stomach, but I know I have to do it. I also

need to track down the other officers who wrote reports from Hope House. They might know something, might hold the answers, but I can't reach them from here.

No one is going to volunteer the truth. Trust feels like a luxury I can no longer afford.

I sigh, taking the mug back to my laptop. There's more to find. I take another sip and settle in for a long day.

"Hello, kitten." Damien's deep voice startles me. I didn't even hear him come in and for the first time since we met, the sound of his voice and the sight of him don't immediately fill me with warmth. I love him, but right now my emotions are too raw to process anything other than betrayal. His gaze lands on my face, studying it carefully before his brows pinch into a frown. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I sigh, shutting down the urge to unload everything.

"Francesca, talk to me." Damien gets to his knees, so we're eye to eye, and he holds my face in his hands. "Something is clearly wrong, kitten. Tell me what I can do."

It's the look on his face that sets me off. The calm, the concern, as if he hasn't been hiding things from me. As if a few comforting words will make everything better.

"What can you do?" The words explode out of me. "You can start by telling me the truth, Damien, for once in your life!" My words shock him as much as they shock me.

He pulls back, confusion written all over his face. "I'm always truthful with you. Where is this coming from?"

A sharp laugh escapes. "Truthful?" I ask, my voice dripping with disbelief. "Is that what you call it, Damien?"

His eyes narrow, the confusion giving way to something darker, more intense. “You don’t get to throw accusations around without telling me what’s really going on!”

“You. Jay. You’re both lying to me and cloaking it in a bullshit need to keep me safe. I don’t need either of you to keep me safe. What I need is the truth, goddammit. I need answers.” My heartbeat flutters inside my chest like it’ll just take flight and carry me with it, but I can’t let it. Not yet. I need to hear him tell me the truth.

“Frankie,” he growls. “I’ll always keep you safe.”

“I appreciate that, but right now that’s not what I need.”

His jaw clenches. “What do you need?”

I sigh, licking my lips. “I need to know how long you and Jay have been hiding things from me.” The words hang in the air, and I brace myself for his answer.

“What? Hiding things?” He shakes his head. “Let’s be clear. Hawkins is not my friend, and we’re definitely not working together.”

“So, you’ve known each other longer than you let on?” I cross my arms, waiting for his response.

Damien’s eyes narrow, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. “It’s not what you think. Jay was just another cop who came around Hope House. That doesn’t mean we were close or that we’re conspiring against you.”

“Then why hide it from me?”

“Because it doesn’t matter,” he snaps. “What’s important is what’s happening now, not something that happened fifteen, twenty years ago.”

“Bullshit!” I snap, frustration rising in my chest. “You wouldn’t hide something from me unless it mattered. What aren’t you telling me, Damien? I deserve to know.”

He exhales, his expression hardening. “It’s not that simple—”

“No, stop.” I cut him off, my voice trembling now, a mix of anger and hurt spilling out. “I’m tired of the excuses. I don’t need you to protect me. I need you to be honest. You keep dodging the truth, and I’m standing here, feeling like I don’t even know you anymore. I can’t do this if you’re going to keep shutting me out.”

I search his face, desperate for some sign of the man I thought I knew. His eyes, usually so intense, now seem distant, and it hurts more than I want to admit.

“The truth is dangerous, Frankie,” he finally says, his voice quieter but still firm. “It’s not always what you want to hear.”

“I can handle it,” I insist. But even as I say it, doubt twists in my gut. Can I handle it?

Damien’s jaw tightens, his eyes clouded with something I can’t quite read. “I wish I could believe that,” he says softly, almost as if he’s talking to himself. “But sometimes the truth can change everything.”

“What do you mean?” My heart pounds as I search his face for any sign of reassurance. Something, anything, that will make this better.

Damien rises to his feet, and runs a hand through his hair, looking away. “There are things from my past, Francesca, things I want to keep in the past. For your sake, not mine.”

“For my sake?” I push back from the chair, standing to face him fully. “Damien, if you think keeping me in the dark is protecting me, you’re dead wrong. I need to

know. I deserve to know.”

His eyes lock onto mine again, filled with a mix of regret and hesitation. “You deserve the truth, yes.....but once you have it, everything changes. There’s no going back.”

The cabin feels colder suddenly, my nerves buzzing with unease. “What are you so afraid of, Damien?” I ask.

He exhales slowly, his shoulders sagging under the weight of whatever he’s carrying. “I’m afraid of losing you,” he admits, his voice rough.

The words hit me hard, but they aren’t enough. Not this time. “You won’t lose me,” I say, but even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice. “Unless you keep lying to me. Then I’ll walk.”

His face hardens. “I’ve told you what matters. But there are things you don’t need to know.”

The air between us grows thick, each passing second making me feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff. “Why don’t you let me decide what I need to know?” I say, my hands trembling.

Damien stays silent, his eyes flicking away from mine as if he can’t face me.

“Damien,” I say, my voice quieter now. “What have you done?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Frankie

It's been over a week, and Damien still won't tell me about whatever dark secret he's hiding. I tell myself it's nothing, that it isn't a colossal red flag begging me to bolt like my life depends on it. I mean, geez, we just got married.

And Damien is much too charming for me to even think of running for the hills. I love him. I just wish he would be honest with me.

But this morning, he's gone again, so I pick up the phone to call Amelia. As the phone rings and I wait to hear the familiar warmth of her voice, I wonder if she's someone I can trust or if she's also part of the corruption.

It's too late to question it, though. "Hey newlywed! I thought you forgot about us single people." She laughs and the sound is so welcome I can almost see her in my mind's eyes. "Kidding, of course. How are things?"

"Good," I answer, but the word sounds like a lie, even to me.

"Good is not what I was expecting," she replies easily. "I was thinking more like mind-blowing, insanely romantic or the best time ever. What's up?"

I want to tell Amelia she's been right all along, that Damien's control over me runs deeper than I ever realized, but the words stick in my throat. I'm not ready to admit it, not even to myself, let alone say it out loud.

“It’s actually great here. Gorgeous and super romantic,” I say instead, the lie feeling heavier than I expected. “Damien’s off doing God knows what, so I figured I’d check in on you.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. I’m good. Bored out of my mind with you gone. No one else really cares about me. Except for Nick. He’s been keeping me company, surprisingly.”

A sharp pang hits me at that, but I push it down quickly. “Good for you,” I reply, trying to keep my voice light.

I don’t know who I can trust right now, but Amelia’s good at what she does. And I need her insight. “Actually, I’ve been thinking about the case, and I wanted your opinion. What if something happened to The Butcher, and now he’s out for revenge? Would that change his profile?”

There’s this long pause, and I start to think Amelia’s going to tell me to chill out and enjoy my getaway. But I hear her sigh, like she’s really thinking through it. “You know, that makes sense. If revenge is driving him, it could explain a lot. A mix of vengeance and psychopathy? That could really make for a dangerous killer.”

“Wait, really?” I sit up a little straighter, surprised by her insight. “Is there any way we could figure out which kid from Hope House fits that profile?”

“Honestly? Not without talking to them personally or knowing their backgrounds,” she says. “And the records are surprisingly slim. But if you’ve got a suspect in mind...hey, wait, you’re not suggesting that Damien could be involved in the murders, are you? You’re safe up there, right?”

A laugh escapes me. “Oh my God, no way! Are you kidding me? You’ve been diving into that psycho research a bit too long. I’m totally safe with my husband! I was just thinking about all those kids from Hope House. If we could dig into their pasts, we

might learn something that ties into this revenge angle.”

“Okay, but if you notice anything weird, promise you’ll let me know? I can look into it on my end.”

“No weirdos here, Ames. Well, except me. But if you could look into that, it’d be super helpful.”

“Anytime, girl. You know I’m always here for you,” she says, her voice brightening up. “But seriously, Frankie, are you okay? Your voice sounds off.”

Taking a deep breath, I say, “Yeah, I’m fine, just feeling a bit out of it, being away from work with The Butcher still on the loose.” It’s mostly true, but not the whole truth. I can’t share everything with her. She jumped on Nick the second I left. Can I even trust her anymore?

“Totally get that. But for your sake, the case and your marriage, just... try , okay?” Her sincerity is a relief, and I nod, silently promising I’ll work on it, even if I keep my real struggles to myself.

“I promise I’ll try,” I reply, though my mind is already spiraling again. “Thanks, Ames. I really appreciate your help. I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

“Of course! Be safe, Frankie,” she says.

I silence my phone, tuck it into my pocket, and step out of the cabin for the first time in days, ready to clear my head.

As I walk onto the narrow trail behind the cabin, the crunch of dirt and pine needles under my boots is the only sound that breaks the stillness. The air is a little crisp, carrying the faint scent of pine and dirt. It’s peaceful, almost too peaceful, like the

trees are holding their breath.

As I walk, the trees begin to thin out a little, giving way to glimpses of the lake between the trunks. It's surprisingly still, almost like glass, reflecting the sky and trees perfectly. Not a ripple in sight. The colors out here are sharper, deeper—the blues of the lake, the greens of the towering pines. It's beautiful. God's country.

Standing here alone, it feels like I'm the only person in the world right now. There's something about this view, about being here, that makes everything else feel far away. Almost like I could just disappear into it and leave everything behind.

Without the distraction of city life, I'm able to think clearly about, well, everything. Being here at the cabin has been great because I've put a lot of pieces of the puzzle together both in terms of The Butcher and in my own life.

The first few days with Damien were amazing and so incredibly romantic, full of delicious meals and lots of laughter as we settled into married life. The sex, of course, is off the charts and only seems to have gotten more intense since we got here.

But there's a downside. Damien's been leaving for the past few days for hours at a time, leaving me alone. I feel trapped, which I hate because it sounds dramatic and as if I don't trust Damien. I do, of course, but something has to change.

Everything has changed . Before the wedding, when Damien and I were getting to know each other, life was different. It was full of fun and unexpected adventures. But now things feel strange and strained. And seriously, where the fuck is he going for hours when he's supposed to be here with me?

I stop and look around, finding that I've wandered so far from the cabin that I can only see the top floor. It takes me close to an hour to make my way back, but I use the time to sort out my thoughts and feelings. It's also enough time to get a good head of

steam going and when I step inside to find my handsome husband smiling at me, I snap.

“Francesca! Did you have a pleasant walk?” His smile is irresistible, but right now it’s easy to resist, at least as long as I suppress my body’s reaction to him.

“Where have you been?” My tone is sharper than I mean it to be, and Damien notices immediately.

“What do you mean? I told you I had some business to take care of. Don’t you remember?” His brows dip, and he takes a few steps forward to comfort me.

I step back and shake my head. “I know what you told me, Damien, but you know what? I have work to do as well, yet you get up and leave without asking about my career!” My heart pounds and I lick my lips. “Why are you holding me captive here?”

“Captive?” He laughs, shaking his head. “You’re not captive. We can leave anytime. I thought you liked it here.”

The condescending tone makes my anger rise. “Only because I stupidly assumed we would be here together, Damien. Your job isn’t more important than mine.”

“Who said it was?” He comes closer until he’s close enough to touch me, and damn he smells good. “I love that you’re passionate about your career, that you chase bad guys and put them behind bars. I love it and admire it.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“I’m just looking out for you, kitten. If it’s too much for you, too mentally taxing, maybe you should take a leave of absence?”

I was just starting to relax in his arms, to let go of the tension, but my whole body goes taut, and I slowly pull back until our gazes lock. “What did you say?”

He holds up his hands, a look of genuine hurt on his face. “I’m not saying you have to or that you should, just that it’s an option. This case seems to take a toll on you, more than your usual cases. Am I right?”

I nod because he’s right, The Butcher case has been more difficult than my others, but it’s also my first serial killer. “Maybe all of this is too much, Damien.”

“That’s all I’m saying,” he agrees.

“I wasn’t finished,” I snap. “Maybe you’re right and the case is a lot, but that’s my job. Maybe the problem is getting into a relationship and getting married in the middle of such an important case.” I take a few more steps back and suddenly things are clearing up. “Maybe what we need is a break, at least until the case is over. Solved.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“I think it’s what I need, what we both need, actually. It’s clear you have other things going on, too. We’re both busy and maybe we should focus on what we do best. Work.”

His brows dip and he frowns, closing the gap between us once again. “That’s not what I want, Francesca. Is it what you want?”

“I know I don’t want to be an afterthought in my own damn house, Damien. We’re not ready for this.”

“That’s not true, my pet.” He’s there again, right in front of me with his muscular

arms around me. “We are ready. I love you and you love me, hell you’re meant for me, kitten.”

When he says things like this, I feel like I’m being unreasonable, that I’m the crazy one here. It’s frustrating, feeling as if I’m not myself and I lean into him. “Damien, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t tell you how I feel? Because I love you Francesca and I don’t feel so bad about our growing pains as a married couple. I don’t want to take a break and work. I want us to work. I need you.” His second hand slides up to cup my face, resting his forehead against mine. “If you don’t love me and you don’t want to make things work out, tell me what I can do.”

“I-I-I never said that.” Did I?

“Not in so many words, no.” His shoulders fall and he takes a step back, but he never stops touching me. “Let’s just take tonight to be together. I’ll heat the spa and open some champagne, see if we can get back to where we were. Can we do that?”

Everything in me wants to say yes, but I hesitate, anyway. I love this man, and I want him in my life and at my side. I can’t walk away from him, definitely over a few bumps. Can I? No.

I look at him, and the raw emotion in his eyes catches me off guard. He looks almost pained, like he’s afraid I’ll leave him. “I love you, Damien. I do.”

“Good.” His voice cuts through the moment, sharp and final, leaving no room for doubt. “Then let’s focus on that.”

The hot tub bubbles invitingly as I slip into the heated water, still a little angry about our fight but unable to resist when Damien hands me champagne, his eyes dark with

intent. The mountain air nips at my wet skin, and the heat between us has nothing to do with the water temperature.

“Still mad at me, kitten?” His voice is silk over steel as he pulls me onto his lap. I should push away, should hold on to my anger about his mysterious disappearances, but his touch sets my skin on fire. The champagne bubbles tickle my nose as I take a long sip, buying time.

“Yes,” I manage, but my body betrays me as his hands grip my waist. The jets pulse against my back while steam rises around us, wrapping us in our private little world. Damien’s thumbs trace circles on my hips, making me shiver despite the heat.

“Let me make it better,” he commands rather than asks, typical Damien. His fingers dig into my flesh. “Show me you’re still mine. Even when you’re angry.”

I want to resist, to prove I’m not so easily controlled, but when he enters me, I can’t help the moan that escapes. The water makes everything slick as I take him deeper, my anger morphing into desperate need. The champagne has gone straight to my head, making everything feel dreamlike and intense.

“That’s it,” he growls, one hand fisting in my hair while the other grips my hip. “Look at me while you fuck me, Francesca. Show me who you belong to.” His eyes lock onto mine, filled with an undeniable possessiveness and something dark.

And flat out delicious.

“Damien...” I gasp as he hits that perfect spot. My hands brace against his broad shoulders, feeling the muscles flex beneath my fingers. He controls our pace, slower than I want, making me feel every inch.

“Say it,” he demands, holding me still when I try to move faster. “Tell me you’re

mine. Only mine.”

“Please,” I whimper, trying to grind against him, but his grip is iron.

“Say. It.” His voice brooks no argument. Water laps at my breasts as I tremble in his grasp.

“I’m yours,” I say, and he rewards me by letting me move again. God help me, I love how he takes control, even as part of me rebels against it. My mind flashes to his earlier disappearance, but his touch drowns out my doubts.

The water churns around us as we chase orgasms together. His possessive touches, his commanding tone should frighten me by how much power he has over me. But it doesn’t. It actually drives me wild. Every brush of his fingers, every demanding kiss makes me forget why I was angry.

“Come for me, pet,” he orders, and my body obeys instantly, pleasure crashing through me as I cry out his name.

As we catch our breath, he brushes my lips with his thumb, his other hand still tangled in my hair. “You belong with me,” he says, and I shiver at the darkness in his tone. “No matter what happens, you’re mine, Francesca. Do you understand me?”

I should be terrified by how completely he owns me, by the possessive glint in his eyes. Instead, I melt into him, pushing away the warning bells in my head. Questions about where he goes, what he does can wait.

At least for tonight.

He reaches for the champagne, refilling our glasses. “To us,” he says, but it sounds more like a claim than a toast. I clink my glass against his, trying to ignore his earlier

words.

No matter what happens.

What exactly does he think is going to happen?

And that's when it dawns on me. This is all a game to him, the whole damn thing. Damien's a master of seduction, and he uses it like a weapon to keep me on my toes.

Is he playing me?

Does he even love me?

I want to believe he does, but now I have a nagging thought there's something darker at play.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Damien

Frankie wants answers and my plan was to wait a few more weeks, but now my plans have to change.

I can adapt as necessary. I've been doing it for years.

I step outside, the crisp mountain air invigorating me. The sun barely peeks over the treetops, and I take off at a jog, enjoying the rhythm of my feet against the earth and the quiet solitude of the mountains.

I need to tell her about my time at Hope House. It wasn't just difficult; it was hell. A place meant for healing turned into a nightmare where Olivia and I met our demons. That's why I lost control. Olivia paid the price for choices of evil men, and I can't ever let that go.

I pause to catch my breath and drop into a set of squats, feeling the burn in my legs. With each squat, I try to push away the memories, but they remind me of that night when we were just children.

After finishing my squats, I stretch my legs, bending to touch my toes and then reaching for the sky. It helps clear my mind, if only for a moment.

I know it's time to let Frankie in on my past. She's my wife now and technically, they can't make her testify against me if she doesn't want to. But I think she deserves to

know the truth about who I am and what I've done.

I never planned on falling in love. And now I must use that love to protect myself.

And Frankie.

I run back up the mountain toward the cabin. Today. I'm going to tell her today.

I push through the door, greeted by the aroma of fresh coffee. I head straight to the kitchen, pouring myself a cup and letting the warmth seep into my bones.

I find Frankie at the table, her laptop open and papers scattered around her. She looks focused. I admire her dedication. I take a seat across from her, setting the coffee down between us. "Hello, beautiful," I say, breaking the silence.

She glances up, a smile breaking through her seriousness. "Hello, handsome. How was your jog?"

"Invigorating," I reply, taking a sip of my coffee. "But I need to talk to you."

Her expression shifts. "About what?"

I take a deep breath and let it out. "About my time at Hope House."

Francesca's eyes go wide as she closes her laptop. "Okay, Damien. I'm listening."

"Hope House was a hell I didn't know could exist in this world," I start, feeling the weight of her gaze. I know I've got her undivided attention. "We had no relatives willing to take us in, so there we were, stuck. Olivia was barely old enough to look after us, and let's be honest, she was more of a spoiled brat than a caretaker, so it was inevitable. At first, it wasn't too awful—just grimy, chaotic, and filled with kids

simmering in their own anger and abandonment. But then, something changed, and it all went to hell.”

She nods. “I suspect a new contractor took over.”

“Exactly, but I didn’t learn that until years later.” I shake my head, recalling the change. “It was like everything changed overnight. The food turned to slop. The sheets weren’t washed regularly, and the staff doubled up on occupancy. But the real horror? The type of kids who started showing up.”

Frankie leans in with her chin resting in her hand, eyes locked on mine. “No.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, hating that I have to relive this, but it’s part of the plan. I feel my throat tighten as I continue. “About a year—maybe fifteen months after the changes, things got dark. Fast.” I close my eyes, the memories flooding back. “Being quiet and smart made me a target for bullying, especially since I was smaller than most kids my age. But honestly? It didn’t faze me.” I let out a laugh that’s more snort than anything else. “It forced me to learn how to fight.”

“Damien,” she whispers, tilting her head. “Those little shits.”

“Right?” I grin, but it fades quickly as I push on with the story. “They were little shits, sure, but they were also vicious and jealous.”

“And no one helped you?”

I shake my head. “Olivia tried. She had her own problems with the girls and the boys.”

“She was beautiful,” Frankie says. “Then and now.”

Her admission surprises me. I thought for sure she wouldn't mention my sister. "She was, and she is. But that often worked against her. The girls stole her things and gave her shit, but she held her own. Usually better. But the boys?" I shake my head, and I feel a lump in my throat.

Frankie senses the shift in the atmosphere and gets up to refill my coffee.

"The boys wanted her. They wanted to possess her, to own her. Who am I kidding? They wanted to fuck her. So, they did." I close my eyes, and the faces of her attackers flash through my mind. "One day, after I was out with Zeke selling photos to tourists, I heard Olivia shout for someone to stop. I took off running because this wasn't her usual angry shout. She was terrified." Chills spread over my skin as I think of that day. "When I made it upstairs, she wasn't in her room. She was in the room shared with three boys—Tristan Dupont, Gavin Kowalski, and Ryder Beaumont. But there were a few others in there too. Some held her down while she kicked and screamed, and the others ripped her clothes off."

"Damien, no!" Her hands fly to her mouth, eyes wide as they fill with tears.

I nod, my own eyes stinging. "I tried to get to her, to get them off her, but I was too small, and they held me back. They made me watch as they stole the life from her. They took turns with her, Frankie. They covered her face with a pillow, shoved her face into the ground until she couldn't breathe, until they broke her nose. I was powerless back then, and she never spoke another word after that day. Until recently."

She's watching me closely, absorbing my words and my pain. Her face shows a mixture of horror and understanding. "I'm so fucking sorry, Damien."

In that moment, I know that whatever I am capable of feeling for someone else, I feel it for Francesca. "Damien?"

“I need you to understand why I had to do it, Frankie. I never felt so powerless, so useless in my life. The shit I witnessed them do to her? My own damn sister? It took years before I stopped dreaming about that night.”

She reaches out to me, her hand hovering just above mine. “Damien, I don’t even know what to say.” I can see it all over her face, the conflict, her morals wrestling with what she feels for me. Exactly what I’m counting on.

“It’s a lot, I know,” I say, taking her hand. She doesn’t pull away, and that’s how I know I’ve got her where I need her.

She nods slowly. “It’s just...a lot. Almost too much to believe.” Her voice shakes, her breaths coming quicker. “I mean...how are you handling this?” She shakes her head. “These are serious accusations.”

“Yeah, they are,” I say, keeping my expression steady. “I was there. I lived it. You want to know me? Well, this is me. This is part of who I am.”

“Why didn’t you call the cops?”

I laugh, but it’s a bitter sound. “Call the cops? They basically lived at Hope House. They saw everything—fights, sexual assaults, theft—it was all documented. And they never did a damn thing about it. Not once. I get it now, but back then, I learned quickly: you can’t trust the police. Ever.”

“Jay?”

I nod. “Him, and others too. But yeah, Jay was there a lot, and he did nothing. I knew if there was any justice, it’d have to come from me. I had to make them pay for what they did—for what they took.”

“Okay,” she says slowly, like she’s still piecing it all together. “But why did you torture them? Disembowel the bodies? You’re not crazy. Are you?”

I let out a snort. Crazy? No. Psycho? Maybe. “It wasn’t just about killing them, Francesca. They took something from me. From Olivia. I had to take something back, make them feel what they put her through. They tortured her. Stole her virginity. Left her to die. I thought I’d lost her for good that day, and I vowed to never be weak again.”

I keep my gaze locked on hers, hoping she’ll see the man behind the monster.

After a long pause, she finally speaks. “I’ve been hunting the killer responsible for those deaths.”

“I know,” I reply, feeling the weight of her anger.

She leans forward, her voice sharp. “You were right under my nose.”

“Kitten, it’s not what you think. I did what I had to do.”

“You lied to me.”

I nod. “I did. And I’m telling you now because I don’t want to hide it from you anymore. But I had to get justice for Olivia.”

Her eyes narrow. “You think taking their lives is justice?”

“Revenge,” I say.

She stares at me with a blank expression. A poker face if you will. “Wow. You’re a serial killer, Damien.” Her words are barely a whisper, but they hit harder than any

slap. “And I’m married to you.”

Francesca looks down, tracing her fingers along the grain of the table like she’s trying to gather her thoughts. I want to reach for her, explain, take her hand, but I don’t move.

“You know,” she says, finally breaking the silence, “I thought I knew the man I married. I thought he wouldn’t have lied to me. He wouldn’t have...” She trails off, taking a shaky breath, and something inside me feels like I’m dying.

“You say you don’t want to hide from me anymore, Damien, but now I’m the one who has to figure out what to do with this. With us.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Damien

After my talk with Francesca this morning, all I want to do is to see Olivia. I don't know if Francesca is going to arrest me because she hasn't said a word to me since our little chat.

Olivia's progress means everything to me. I can't let anything, or anyone interfere, but she needs to know in case I get locked up for life. I know it could still happen, but Francesca is my wife, and unless she secretly recorded me, which I don't think she did, it's her word against mine.

Would she want the world to know she's been fucking a serial killer so intimately that she said, "I do?" While searching for said serial killer?

I don't think so.

I step into Serenity House, donning my charming brother persona. Tara's radiant smile hits me like a breath of fresh air in this otherwise suffocating place.

"Mr. Wolfe! It's so good to see you."

"Tara." I nod. My actions this morning have made my heart race, but I need to ensure that Olivia is taken care of forever.

"You'll be shocked at her progress," she says with a smile, but my mind is so

preoccupied that I can't even manage a smile back.

I linger in the doorway, unable to step inside just yet. Seeing Olivia like this—light in her eyes, a small but genuine smile as she talks to Dr. Atkins—is almost too much to process. She's come so far, and part of me doesn't feel like I deserve to see it. After everything I've done in her name, all the blood on my hands, here she is, more at peace than I ever expected.

Dr. Atkins catches sight of me and gives a small nod before leaving, allowing me a few moments alone with my sister. Olivia's eyes follow his exit before they settle on me, and the smile on her face widens just a bit.

"Hey, big brother." Her voice is soft but steady, and that alone sends a jolt through my chest.

"Olivia," I say, stepping forward, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "I hear you've been doing... really well."

She chuckles softly, a sound I haven't heard in years, and it nearly undoes me. "So they say. But you know how it is. Some days are better than others."

The understatement doesn't go unnoticed, but there's a clarity in her gaze now that wasn't there before. She's really here with me at this moment, and I don't know if it's relief, guilt or pure fear that's weighing heavier on me.

She pats the bed beside her, and I take a seat, feeling my heart race with every second. I know she doesn't know the whole truth about why those people who hurt her can't hurt anyone else ever again. She doesn't know about the real monster sitting beside her, masked by a brother's love. And I can't stop wondering what would happen if she did.

“Remember when I couldn’t even look people in the eyes?” she asks, breaking the silence. “And now I’m talking to therapists, working through all the darkness.”

Her words hit deeper than she could ever know. The darkness she’s conquered is nothing compared to the darkness I carry. She’s fought her way out of it, while I walked right into it willingly.

And I’d do it again for her sake.

“Yeah, Liv. You’re stronger than anyone I know.” My voice is raw, barely more than a whisper. I can’t bring myself to say anything else because I’m not sure if it will come out steadily.

Olivia reaches over and squeezes my hand, a simple gesture that almost undoes me. She has no idea what I’ve done, what I’d do all over again to protect her. And now that I’ve told Francesca everything, how long before Olivia has to live without me?

“What’s going on, Damien?” she asks, her gaze searching my face. “You look, I don’t know, stressed.”

Her question catches me off guard. Her eyes narrow a bit, as if trying to read me more deeply. I drag my hand back slowly, running it through my hair in a weak attempt to ground myself. “Just a lot on my mind, I guess.” I force a small smile. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“But you’re always here, Damien. All these years, you were here.” Olivia smiles, and I look down, swallowing hard. I don’t have the heart to tell her I may go to prison.

“You deserve to be safe,” I say finally, my voice almost too quiet to hear. “You deserve to be happy.”

She leans in, resting her head on my shoulder like she used to when we were kids. “I am. And it’s all because of you.”

The simplicity of her words, the way she says them with such certainty, makes me want to scream. She’s whole, she’s healing, and all I can think of is that I might be ripped away from her because of the things I’ve done. I wonder if she’ll forgive me, or if she’ll even want to.

But Francesca—what if she tells? What if, after everything, my confession drives her to turn me in? I told her I’m done hiding, but the truth is, I’m terrified. For me, yes, but more for Olivia, left to pick up pieces of a life that’s already cracked and fragile.

Olivia must feel the tension in me because she lifts her head, peering at me with clarity in her eyes. “Damien, are you really okay?”

For a second, I want to tell her everything, to let the whole truth spill out and fall between us, raw and unforgiving. I want her to know what I’ve done, how far I’ve gone for her, the sacrifices I made that tore pieces out of me until there was almost nothing left. But I can’t. I won’t taint this moment, this fragile peace she’s worked so hard to find.

“Yeah, Liv,” I manage, barely meeting her gaze. “I’m proud of you. More than you’ll ever know.”

She watches me, not entirely convinced but willing to let it go, and she leans back against her pillow, looking out the window.

After a long moment, she turns back to me. “Thank you, Damien. You’re the only reason I’m getting better. I’ve got a long way to go.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Olivia. No matter what.”

Just as Olivia's words settle over me, my phone vibrates in my pocket, jolting me back to reality. I glance down and see Francesca's name on the screen.

This is it. The end of my life as I know it.

Francesca: I need you to come home. We have something to talk about.

I shove my phone back into my pocket and look at Olivia, sitting here with hope in her eyes.

I stand and say, "I'll be back," trying to keep my voice steady. I want to come back. But I don't know if I will.

She pouts like she did when we were kids, and it makes me smile. "Promise?"

My throat tightens, but I nod, giving her the best smile I can manage. "Yeah. I promise."

I turn away before the lie settles, before it digs in and feels real, because for all I know, Francesca's waiting with a squad of officers at the cabin, ready to end this chapter of my life for good.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Frankie

I pace the length of the empty bedroom, my heart hammering like a caged animal against my ribs. It's like I can feel the walls closing in. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing—hell, I don't even know what the right thing is anymore. But staying silent feels wrong and doing my job breaks my heart knowing what I've done.

Damien's been gone a while and I don't even know how long it will be before he gets here. After investigating the cases and the torture of the dead men, I should be repulsed, disgusted even. But I feel a strange understanding, empathy for a man who should be nothing but a name in a file, not the man I married.

Everything about Damien makes sense now, the haunted look in his eyes, the anger, the relentless need for control. What he and his sister went through, what he's done for her, everything.

It all clicks into place with a terrible clarity. Seeing Olivia makes me realize that he's bound to her pain in ways I'll never understand. For him, this revenge is more than justice.

It's his way of balancing the scales, a way to heal what can't ever be fixed.

But then, there's my badge. My duty. I'm a cop, sworn to uphold justice. Justice for everyone, no matter how ugly or vile they are. That's the code I live by, isn't it? Can I bring myself to undo everything Damien has done? Can I really drag this whole

bloody mess into the light, lay it out there in the open for others to judge?

And for what? Justice for monsters who ruined lives and walked free? Does anyone truly benefit from that?

“FUCK!” I scream at the wall, my fists clenched. “FUUUUCK!”

I inhale slowly, trying to ground myself. I have to do this. I head upstairs and change from lounge pants and a sweater to jeans and boots. The air’s getting colder, and I don’t want to look like a cop—or a hot mess.

As I reach the living room, I hear Damien’s voice echoing through the house. “Frankie?” His voice is loud, then softer. “Francesca?”

“I’m here.”

His brows dip and confusion flickers across his face. “Is everything okay?”

I nod. “No. Yes. Everything will be okay.”

His gaze rakes over me and my body responds to the heated look in his hazel eyes. God, I hate that he has this control over me. “What’s going on Francesca?”

“I need to go somewhere.” I clasp my hands together and keep still, watching as his eyes narrow with uncertainty.

“Where?”

I let out a breath and shake my head. “It’s not jail, and I’m not arresting you.” He studies me, suspicion clear in his eyes. “Please. I need to show you something.”

His jaw clenches like he's about to break some teeth, and his eyes dart back and forth. "You're my wife now, Francesca, and you can't reveal anything I've shared with you."

"I'm not turning you in or revealing anything, Damien. I swear." I hold up both hands. "It's a place off Route 66." I descend the last few steps and make my way to the front door. "Come on."

He doesn't move, just watches me. I wonder what he sees—the woman who might be his undoing, or the one he's bound to protect. "Where are we going?"

"We're going back, Damien. To my past." He still doesn't budge, and I push harder. "You trusted me with your darkest secret, and I'm still here."

"Fine," he growls, and closes the distance between us. "Leave your phone here."

"I have nothing on me, Damien. You're safe. I swear." I pat my pockets and turn slowly before we're face to face once again. "I've given this a lot of thought. I need to do this."

"I'm driving."

"Good." I'm too wound up to focus on the road. This is part of my history, a place I've avoided for years. I don't know if it's the right move, but we're on the way now, and there's no stopping.

After a long silence, Damien finally speaks. "When I said I loved you, I meant it, Francesca."

I scoff, looking out the window. "Hard to believe."

He clenches the wheel, glancing over. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," I sign and turn to face him, feeling my anger rise despite what I'm about to do. "You targeted me, Damien. You sought me out to make sure that I didn't get anywhere close to solving these murders." I laugh and shake my head. "A billionaire who gets his own coffee? It was a good show, but it was just a show, wasn't it?"

He doesn't confirm or deny it and that's answer enough. "I wasn't supposed to fall in love with you, kitten. I only wanted to make sure that you fell in love with me." He shakes his head. "But I couldn't stop myself."

I nod, almost numb. "But falling in love was all part of it. You didn't romance me because you wanted to. It was a calculated plan." His silence says it all. "A twisted plan."

His grip on the wheel tightens and the car speeds up. "I am that man, Frankie. Everything I did was exactly what I wanted to do." His eyes flick to mine, burning with an intensity that makes my breath catch, and his foot presses down even harder on the accelerator.

The car rockets forward, the speed climbing too fast, too reckless. Panic rises in my chest, and a terrifying thought claws its way in. He's lost control. He wants to kill us both. "Damien!" I yell, my hands gripping the edge of the seat. "Slow down! We need to turn up here!"

For a moment, he doesn't respond. Then, his foot eases off the gas, and the car slows, enough that I can breathe again.

"Yes, I wanted you to fall in love with me. I needed you to, but somewhere along the way, you started to matter to me," he says, his tone lower now, but still threaded with simmering anger. "I thought of ways to make you smile with your eyes, to hear your

sweet laugh. I wanted you to love me more than I needed you to.”

The car slows further, and I let out a shaky breath, my pulse finally easing.

“That was just fucking stupid,” I bark, and don’t care how he takes it. It was a stupid move. I lean forward, forcing calm into my voice. “There’s a side road up ahead. Take it.”

His eyes narrow as he glances over. “This isn’t your jurisdiction.”

“No. It’s not.” He steers onto the narrow dirt road, leaving the world behind us. Soon, an abandoned barn comes into view, faded blue paint flaking off, barely standing against the elements. “Stop up there,” I say, pointing to the old willow tree beside it.

He parks, glancing at the empty farmhouse. “Where are we?”

“Bum fuck.” I step out, inhaling the sharp night air, and walk past the barn, stopping at the tree. “This was my family’s house.”

Damien follows, his steps heavy. “Why are we here, Francesca?”

I press my hand against the tree, grounding myself. “To share demons.” I pause, gathering strength. “When I was a teenager, some men broke in. My dad and his partner, Jay, were investigating them, and they didn’t take it well.”

“I know. You told me.”

I nod, my voice tightening. “I didn’t tell you all of it.” I meet his eyes, seeing the impact of my words already. “They didn’t just come to scare us, Damien. They came to make sure we’d never get in their way again.”

His face hardens, his fists clenching.

“What you don’t know is that it wasn’t my dad who shot them. Or my mom.” I swallow hard, forcing the words out. “I wanted to help, so I grabbed my dad’s backup gun.” I close my eyes, remembering it all too clearly.

“Without thinking, I raised the gun and squeezed the trigger, hitting one in the side. I remember being surprised at how loud it was. Another shot rang out, but it was the one that hit dad, and I pulled the trigger two more times.” I remember freaking out and screaming while Mom did the same. I open my eyes and our gazes lock.

“Francesca,” he whispers, taking a step forward.

I swallow hard, the memories flooding back. “There was another guy, and I shot at him, but he got away. The bullet just hit the wall.” My voice wavers, but I press on. “A few minutes later, Jay showed up. Mom was bawling, I was bawling. It was horrific.” I choke on a sob, trying to hold myself together. “Jay sent me to my room, and I watched him wipe the gun clean, then put it in my dad’s hand. When the investigation started, Jay drilled the story into me, making me promise to tell it exactly the way he told me. The story I first told you.”

Damien’s face darkens as he absorbs it all. “Jay covered it up,” he says, his voice low and tense. “You killed those men, and Jay covered it up.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, barely meeting his eyes. “That’s why it’s so hard to accept that you both lied to me for so long. You both used me.”

“Francesca, I think you need to know something. It’s time you knew the truth.”

“What truth? That I’m a cold-blooded killer like you are? Hell, I know that. Wait until you hear what’s behind door number two,” I snort.

“Francesca, listen to me.” Damien’s voice is low, commanding. “I know you’re not going to believe this, but Jason Hawkins is your father. Your real father.”

I stare at him, waiting for some hint that he’s joking, but his expression doesn’t change. He’s dead serious.

“No, he’s not!” My voice breaks, and I feel the anger boiling up, filling my chest like fire. “Frank DeMarco is my father. I’m named after him, for fuck’s sake. Why would you even say that?”

Damien grabs my arms, steadying me, his eyes intense. “Kitten, I know this is hard to believe,” he says, giving me a slight shake. “But as soon as I had the resources to look into Hawkins, I did. It’s how I found out everything about you. Your mother, Suzanne Gloria Garner, also lived at Hope House.”

I shake my head, staring into Damien’s eyes, searching for some hint that this isn’t real. “No.”

“Yes, kitten. That’s where she met Jay. The cop on the take.” He watches me closely, unflinching. “Hawkins was already married, so your mom married Frank DeMarco. But she and Jay kept seeing each other for years.”

“No.” The word slips out, barely a whisper, but it feels like a punch to the chest. “How could you know that? Why are you lying to me?”

Damien’s gaze sharpens. “I’m a tech genius, Frankie. I also have your DNA. And Jay’s DNA.” He pauses, watching the shock settle over me. “I know everything. About you, Jay, your mother.” His eyes darken, voice dropping lower. “Even George McCormick.”

The name hits me like a punch to the gut, freezing me in place. My mouth goes dry,

and my legs buckle beneath me as I drop to the ground, shaking. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and before I know it, the tears start, hot and unstoppable.

Damien knows everything.

And it will destroy me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Damien

Francesca collapses to her knees, her breath coming in shallow gasps, and panic spikes in my chest. She knows I know. She knows I've uncovered her secrets, the horrible things she's done.

This is all part of my plan.

"Francesca!" I kneel beside her, my hands cupping her face, forcing her to look at me. "You're okay. Just breathe."

Her eyes dart back and forth, fear and disbelief swirling in her brown depths. "In and out," I instruct, my voice low and soothing. "Breathe in and out."

"I'm okay." Frankie exhales and nods. "I'm okay. What do you know about George McCormick?"

I smile, knowing I've struck a nerve. "I know he was the man who broke into your home. I also know you killed him."

There's no denying it now. She knows I'm not bluffing when I say I know everything. I help Francesca to her feet, my hands gripping her arms as I steady her.

I guide her to the car, opening the passenger door for her. She slides in, and I close the door gently before making my way to the driver's side.

“Tell me everything, Frankie. From the beginning.” I need to know every detail, every moment that led to McCormick’s death.

She nods, closing her eyes as her arms wrap around herself in a protective gesture. “I spent weeks tracking his every move,” she says, her voice steady. “I memorized his routines, his habits. I knew where he bought his coffee, where he liked to eat lunch, even the brand of cigarettes he smoked.”

As she tells the story, I listen intently. My eyes never leave her face.

It’s like listening to my own thoughts, my own methods. The meticulous planning, the obsessive attention to detail—it’s all so deliciously familiar.

“I watched him, day after day, waiting for the perfect moment to take him out,” she continues, her eyes taking on a distant look. “I had to be patient, to bide my time until I knew I could take him down without any witnesses.”

“How did you finally catch him?”

She shivers, but her voice remains steady. “I lured him to an abandoned warehouse with a fake drug deal. He thought he was meeting a new supplier, but he found me.”

She hunted him. Unbelievable.

“I wore a hidden camera to record every moment of his confession.” She looks at me, her eyes cold and hard. “When I was there, something in me snapped. I didn’t want to arrest him. I wanted him to pay. I wanted him to feel the same fear and helplessness that I felt that night.”

The intensity of her words sends a thrill through me. This is the Frankie I love, the one who’s not afraid of anything. “And did he?”

A wicked smile spreads across her face. “Well, I shot him in the leg so he couldn’t run, then I cuffed him and put him in the back of the car. He begged. He pleaded. He even tried to bargain with me. But I didn’t let up, not for a second. I made him suffer, made him feel every ounce of pain he inflicted on my family.” She nods toward the barn. “Right there in that barn.”

“You brought him here?”

She nods. “I did. I knew this place would be empty. After my dad—well, the dad I knew—got shot that night, my mom and I never came back to this place. You can still see the bloodstains and bullet holes. So, it was here that I made sure George McCormick paid with his life.”

I look at her, feeling my blood warm. “Ah, kitten. Please tell me how you did it.”

Francesca turns to me, a smile tugging at her lips. “You’re a sick fuck.” I can’t stand it any longer. I crush my lips to hers, unable to resist the dark, twisted desire coursing through me. Her lips meet mine with the same intensity, fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me deeper into the kiss.

When we finally break apart, both of us breathing hard, I rest my forehead against hers. “Please continue.” Her big brown eyes flash with a darkness that mirrors my own.

“He was bigger than when I was a kid by at least twenty pounds,” she says. “I knew I’d need every advantage, so I used plastic ties to bind his arms and legs in the barn. His leg was bleeding, so he couldn’t go anywhere. And if he got away, I had his confession on tape.”

I can picture it vividly. Frankie, a fierce avenging angel, standing over her captive prey. McCormick, helpless and at her mercy.

“He laughed at first,” she continues, a hint of shame creeping into her tone. “Then I put a bullet in his gut, purposely missing any organs because I wanted him to hurt.”

Francesca’s my ultimate dream. She’s exactly like me.

“He said my dad was looking into things he shouldn’t. They had an arrangement, and he broke the rules.” Her body trembles at the memory, but her voice remains steady. “I was angry and in disbelief. Dad was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a dirty cop.”

I nod, offering silent support as she relives the moment.

“I emptied the clip into his body, slowly and strategically, until he stopped moving. I left him there all night to bleed out, and when I was sure he was dead, I got rid of the body and buried it over there under that willow tree.”

“Do you regret it? Killing him?”

“Nope. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Pride swells in my chest at her words. Francesca is stronger than I ever imagined. She’s not just a pretty cop or even a dirty cop. She’s a kindred spirit—someone who understands me.

“Can I tell you something?”

“What?”

“The reason I know you killed him is that I was stalking him. He killed my parents that fateful night. He’s the bastard that killed my parents, and we got sent to Hope House.”

“Really? You were stalking him too? How? Did you watch me kill him?”

“Oh, kitten. I’ve been watching your every move for years.” I squeeze her hand.

“Years?” She leans closer, daring me with her eyes. “Then you know exactly what I’m capable of, don’t you? I’m just like you, Damien,” she says. “Cold, calculating, ruthless. We’re two sides of the same coin.”

I pull back just enough to capture her lips in a searing kiss, pouring all of my pride, my admiration, my twisted love into it. She responds with equal fervor, her tongue tangling with mine as we lose ourselves in the moment.

When we finally break apart, both of us breathing hard, I rest my forehead against hers. “That we are, my pet,” I say, a wicked grin spreading across my face. “That we are.”

I turn the key, and the engine comes to life. My gaze shifts to Frankie. There’s a wicked little spark in her eyes that brings every sick impulse inside me to the surface.

I want to fuck her so bad. Right here. Right now. I adjust my cock and slide the seat belt on. Sex will have to wait.

“Ready for the wildest ride of your life?” I ask, shifting the car into drive. “You realize we’re just getting started.”

“Then let’s make it worthwhile. But I need you to do something,” she says, her voice low. “And I don’t mean you have to stop.”

I’m intrigued. “Go on.”

“Make them disappear, Damien. No bodies, no connection to The Butcher. Then the

case goes cold. I can't solve a case with no bodies."

"So, you want me to hide them?" I ask.

"Just get rid of them. I don't care how, and I don't want to know. I am an officer of the law."

I reach for her hand. "You got it, kitten. Have I mentioned today how much I love you?"

"No, and don't. I'm still pissed you lied to me."

"Think we can kiss and make up?" I slide my hand up her thigh. She lets out a small laugh.

"We'll see. We have a lot to talk about."

I grin, already sensing the heat building between us. "I can't wait."

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Damien ~ Six Months Later

“This is so exciting! Don’t you think so, Frankie?” Olivia can barely contain herself as she and my wife put the finishing touches on their evening looks.

“I think this is amazing,” Frankie confirms, turning to me with that gleam in her eyes I know so well. “Damien Wolfe, Humanitarian of the Year.”

I almost want to laugh at the title. Humanitarian of the Year. Who would’ve thought? Truth is, I couldn’t care less about most awards, but this one...this one matters. The software and interface we’ve developed has changed everything for people like Olivia. Her progress has made her both a celebrity and a miracle. We’ve proven what I’ve always suspected. The human brain is far more resilient than our fragile bodies.

“I’ll have the most beautiful dates in the room,” I say, meaning every word.

“Charmer,” Frankie mumbles, looking absolutely stunning in her champagne gold dress that hugs every curve. “And damn straight you will.” The sparkle in her eyes makes me wish we could skip this whole thing. I can’t wait to get her home later.

“Yes, and if we don’t get into the limo now, we’ll be late,” I remind them.

Frankie scoffs. “You’re the guest of honor. They literally can’t start without you.”

She has a point, but still. “Let’s go.”

The ride to the theater is quiet, at least on my end. My mind keeps drifting to other

details beyond tonight's award. Sure, I'm proud of what Dr. Atkins and I have accomplished, but there are still names on The List waiting to be scratched off, and the hunger for that never quite leaves me.

"Wow," Olivia breathes out. "I can't believe this. It's like the Oscars but for nerds."

Frankie and I share a laugh at her unintentionally backhanded compliment. I turn to my wife, studying her face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. No." She shakes her head. "I'm ready."

The red-carpet circus takes ten minutes before we're finally inside and led to our seats. Front and center, naturally. We're sharing a table with other honorees, which suits me fine. Despite what Frankie says about my brilliance, I have zero desire to be in the spotlight more than my work and wealth already force me to be.

"It's packed in here," Olivia whispers to Frankie, her earlier excitement giving way to nerves.

"These things are always filled to the brim," Frankie reassures her with practiced ease. "Just smile and act like you belong because you do. Besides, I see a few people around the room trying to work up the courage to come and talk to you."

"No!" Olivia's eyes go wide as she frantically scans the room.

"Yes. I'll help you get started and then I have to play the role of arm candy to the big guy," Frankie tells her.

Olivia snorts. "More like he's your arm candy."

Frankie's laugh carries across the table. "I'm not sure which of us you just insulted, but I'm still going to introduce you."

I watch them walk away together, satisfied. Olivia needs someone like Frankie in her corner, someone she can trust and rely on. Settling back in my chair, I observe the room with careful attention. All the so-called important people in the city are here in their fancy dress. The mayor's chatting up the chief of police while the district attorney huddles in the corner with Jay and another award recipient. Civil servants rubbing elbows with the elites.

One big fucking fraud.

But that's not my focus tonight. No, my attention is fixed on something— someone—else. He doesn't deserve the long, happy life he's living, free to roam the streets. Not after what he did.

What he failed to do.

What they failed to do.

I can't act now, of course, but as the night progresses, a plan takes shape in my mind. It wouldn't take much, especially keeping my promise to Francesca to make it clean and quick. Well, maybe not too quickly, but clean and efficient.

When I take the stage, the award feels heavy in my hand as I face the crowd for my acceptance speech. Nothing special, but somehow different. I thank the voters, the people who genuinely care about making a difference in this world, and of course, the assholes who fund it all.

“This all started as a small project with a very specific purpose: to help my sister. All I wanted was to hear her voice again and I worked diligently with the help of Dr. Atkins to make it happen, and now here we are.”

A ripple of laughter moves through the room, and I feel myself relax slightly. The speech flows perfectly because I won't accept any other outcome. I've spent weeks

preparing, crafting every poignant, heartfelt word until the audience is completely pulled in. When they rise to their feet with thunderous applause, I say, “Thank you. Truly.”

The applause is nice, but it doesn’t feed me the way certain other things in life do. Still, I give them the expected smile as I thrust the golden trophy skyward, pretending it means everything. The applause swells even louder, and finally I’m back beside Francesca.

“That was some speech. Consider me impressed.” She bumps her shoulder against mine before pulling me into a hug. “Good job. No, great job.”

“Thank you, my pet.” I kiss the top of her head, my gaze connecting first with Jay, then the former chief of police, before I offer a bland smile to everyone watching.

Frankie pulls back, studying me with that sharp detective’s eye before turning to flash a brilliant smile at the crowd. “What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

Like she doesn’t already know. “Just thinking. About The List.”

I feel her body go rigid as she leans into me. “I thought the boys from Hope House were all taken care of. Damien, you promised.”

That’s what I told her, and it wasn’t a lie. “They are,” I assure her truthfully. “The problem is that they aren’t the only ones on The List.” I hold her gaze, willing her to understand what I’m really saying. “Do you even want to know more?”

She nibbles her bottom lip, her tell when she’s weighing something carefully. “Nope. But thank you for asking.” Those full, glossy pink lips draw closer until they press against mine. When she pulls back with a soft moan, her eyelids flutter like butterfly wings. “That never gets old.”

“Never,” I agree, pulling her against me while cameras click frantically around us. “Can we get out of here now?”

Her head falls back with that thrilling laugh I love. “You don’t want to meet with your adoring crowd?”

“Fuck no,” I growl, nibbling her ear.

“But Olivia is having so much fun.” She gestures to where my sister stands laughing with a group, looking completely in her element.

“One hour,” I tell her. “And I’m leaving with or without you.”

Something flashes in her eyes before she grabs my lapels, pulling me close. “How about you get out of here right now?” she says, reading me like a book. “Slip into something a little more comfortable?” Her eyebrow wiggles make me want to laugh. “And Olivia and I will join you at the penthouse in about two hours. Is that enough time?” She doesn’t ask for details, but her eyes tell me she knows exactly what’s on my mind.

“Yes, that should be more than enough time. Thank you.” I stare at this woman. This impossible, perfect creature seems too good to be real, like something I conjured up from my twisted mind. “Thank you, kitten.”

“My pleasure.” She kisses both my cheeks and whispers, “go now and be slick about it.”

I smile, shaking hands with professional acquaintances as I make my way out, breathing in the slightly sticky evening air.

Then I’m on the move, catching a cab down the street before jumping out a few blocks later. I repeat this dance several times before stopping to change clothes and

collect the tools I need.

Time to scratch another name off The List.

My kit isn't what it used to be, not since I made that promise to Frankie about keeping things clean and simple. No more spectacles with my enemies. Still, some tools are necessary, and I grab what I need before heading to North Hollywood where the streets stretch wider and quieter at this time of night. The ranch house is easy to find, with its sloped roof and those shabby green shutters that have definitely seen better days.

The driveway sits empty as I cruise past, parking a few blocks away before doubling back on foot. Security is absolute shit here. I slip inside like I'm walking through my own front door, and then I wait.

And wait.

Twenty minutes pass before headlights flash from the street, turning into the driveway before the engine cuts off. I stay perfectly calm because this isn't the last name on The List, but it's close. This name isn't about Olivia's safety or peace of mind. Oh no. This is pure, stone-cold vengeance.

The front door's squeaky hinge tells me exactly where my prey is and where he's heading. Keys drop into the wooden tray beside the front door. He toes off his shoes with a grunt before walking through the living room and into the kitchen to grab a beer. His usual ritual.

I wait in the den, surrounded by a leather sectional and oversized television. When he hits the light switch, a harsh golden light floods the room. His reaction is immediate.

"Jesus fuck," he growls, spotting my silhouette. "You scared the ever living fuck outta me. What do I owe this visit?"

I watch him closely, noting he's slightly inebriated and not as sharp on the uptake as usual. "You don't owe me anything for this visit. Consider it on the house."

"Oh." He nods, a smirk playing on his lips. "You think you can stop the payments now that you married her?"

"The payments." I savor the word, letting silence stretch between us. "They were never about the money, Detective. They were about keeping you exactly where I needed you. Coming back, again and again, thinking you had the upper hand."

His smirk falters. "What are you talking about?"

"Hope House." I lean forward, watching the color drain from his face at those two simple words. "You remember Hope House, don't you? September 15th. The night they took my sister to Saint Mary's Hospital. You were there. I saw you. Standing in that hallway, pocketing an envelope while she fought for her life three doors down."

"Ancient history," he grunts, but his hand trembles as he lifts his beer. "And your sister was?—"

"A vegetable. Yes, that's what you said back then, too. Such a convenient excuse to bury the case, wasn't it? But we both know there was evidence. Witnesses. Everything needed to put those monsters away. Everything except an honest cop."

He surges to his feet, swaying slightly. "You think you can prove any of this? After all these years?"

"Prove it?" A soft laugh escapes me. "Hawkins, I don't need to prove anything. While you were busy counting your money, watching your bank account grow, I was taking everything that mattered to you. I married your daughter, Detective. Your own flesh and blood. Sweet Francesca, who's quite the catch, never knew her real father was the corrupt piece of shit who let this all happen."

Pain twists his face. “She was never supposed to know.”

“But she does. And she knows you were fucking her mother until she committed suicide once she realized you’re a dirty cop. And what a great man her father was. You know, the one who raised her? Well, until you had him killed.” I can’t help the scoff that escapes.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I know everything. I know you burned your own daughter’s house down, so she couldn’t figure out how dirty you are. You thought it would give you the upper hand. I know how you took bribes while other girls at Hope House suffered the same fate as my sister. How you looked the other way, again and again, padding your pockets while families got destroyed.”

“Francesca will never forgive you,” he stammers, finally understanding the gravity of his situation.

“Forgive me?” The knife catches the dim light as I step forward. “Francesca will never know. But she’ll be taken care of because she’s mine now. Just like your reputation is mine. Your pride is mine. Your future...”

I step closer, my knife high in the air, watching the arrogance in his eyes finally give way to pure horror. “That belongs to me, too.”

I walk through the penthouse door just after midnight. Frankie is standing directly in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, her silhouette sharp against the city lights. Something’s different. Something’s off.

“It’s done,” I say simply.

She turns. And then she laughs. Not a chuckle. Not a giggle. A full, throaty laugh that

sends ice through my veins. In her hand, she's holding a thick manila folder I've never seen before.

"Done?" Frankie's smile is dark, almost predatory. "Oh, Damien. My precious pet. We're just getting started."

She tosses the folder at my feet. I hesitate for a moment, then bend down to pick it up, my heart races as I open it.

Inside are meticulously organized documents—surveillance photos, bank records, and encrypted communications. Every detail about the man I just murdered, but also hints of his connections to my own life. The handwriting in the margins? It's unmistakably Francesca's.

"What is this?" I demand.

"I've been watching you, studying you. Learning your every move. You thought you were the hunter, but you've always been my prey."

She steps closer, her eyes glinting with a darkness that rivals my own. "Checkmate, Mr. Wolfe."

I smile. The thrill of our game ignites something deeper within me. "You've captured your king, my queen. But tell me—" I trace my thumb across her lower lip, hearing her breath hitch. "Did you account for the knight's sacrifice?"

She tilts her head, her gaze locked on mine, a slow smile curling at her lips. "Knights sacrifice...for their queen, don't they?"

Before she can say another word, I pull her close, our lips crashing together into a kiss that burns through me like wildfire.

In this final moment, there's nothing left but two twisted souls bound in darkness, choosing each other over everything else. And that's the most wicked promise of all.