



The Secrets We Share

(Shadows & Secrets Duet #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: We've emerged from the shadows, carrying secrets we're ready to reveal.

Keira

The time for hiding in the shadows is over. I'm done running. It's time to take back the life I once knew in New York, no matter the cost, no matter the risk. My dreams of having a family—of discovering where I came from—have been shattered by the cruel hand fate has dealt me. The family I was born into, but never knew? A twisted joke. But there's a bond stronger than blood, stronger than anything the universe can throw at us. The bond of loyalty is stronger than the ties of birth, and the few I trust, the ones who have stood by me, will be the only reason we make it out alive. Together, we'll fight for the future we deserve—even if it means facing down the darkness that wants to drag us into its depths.

Harkin

She's everything to me. Keira is my heart, my reason, and I would tear apart the world to free us from the chaos our parents have have shackled around our necks. Being with her is like breathing—it's effortless, natural, and yet, in this world of lies and deceit, nothing is ever as easy as it seems. Life has a sick way of ripping everything apart, of taking it all from you in an instant, and right now, we're caught in its unforgiving grip. But as long as I have Keira by my side, I'll keep fighting, no matter the cost. I'll burn this world to the ground if that's what it takes to save us.

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Page 1

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ONE

KEIRA

You're Gonna Get What's Coming - Klergy, VG LUCAS

Two hundred thousand adults are taken against their will in the US every year. I've already added to this statistic. I don't plan on making it a yearly occurrence. Cinder growls at the crash down the hallway. Harkin left this morning to meet with one of his contacts down the mountain. I told him I'd be fine, but here we are.

As I push my feet into my running shoes, I'm careful not to cause the old wooden floorboards to groan under my weight. Did we mark all of them just in case? We sure did—the tiny flecks of silver Sharpie glint off the light from the nightstand lamps.

I quickly empty my bedside drawer of the small arsenal Harkin insisted we both keep. The small Glock fits perfectly into the front holster pocket of my leggings. My knives slide snugly into the side pockets, but with them loaded, my phone has nowhere to go. I send a quick SOS text to Harkin, a surefire way to have him lose his mind as he speeds back to the cabin.

The heavy footsteps sound closer to our bedroom door. Shoving my phone into my sports bra, I look at the door one last time to ensure it's locked. Grabbing Cinder's collar to get her attention, I give her the silent signal to come, and she follows hesitantly, her teeth still bared at the intruder.

Opening the hatch at the bottom of the closet, I usher her to go first down into the

basement. The motion-activated lights flicker once she's on the bottom steps. I quietly tug the hatch back into place, sliding the lock closed and fastening the added padlock Harkin installed when we arrived.

The basement is full of our training gear, the focus of our hibernation over the last few months we've been holed up in this place. Hustling across the floor to the opposite corner, I reach behind the giant floor-to-ceiling shelf, looking for the hidden exit lever. My fingers run across the cool metal, and I pull down. Freezing air blows into me when the secret door pops free.

"Cinder, scout," I command.

She shoves past me into the passageway, running ahead to give me the all-clear. I know we're good to go when she returns and sits at my feet. I can't hear the footsteps above in the house anymore, and my anxiety levels a bit. When I get to the tunnel's edge, the mess of vines and moss closes off the entrance. Pulling my knife from my pocket, I flick it open and run it along the rock wall, cutting free the greenery just enough for us to sneak through.

Cinder stays by my side as my phone vibrates against my chest, but I can hear shouting in the distance. Time is precious; until we're at the meeting point, he'll have to wait to hear from me. A mistake, maybe. A punishment in the making, absolutely.

The ground is solid beneath my feet. Surrounding vegetation is dead from winter's cruel hand. Drifts of hardened snow trickle with tiny rivulets. We might be encroaching on spring, but it's still far too cold here in the mountains for anything to grow from the ground.

Cinder leads our way through the dense forest. Even with our trail constantly changing to avoid leaving a worn path for someone to follow, it doesn't make her stray from the endpoint. I pick up the pace, glancing over my shoulder at the ridge the

tiny cabin sits on. I can't see anything, but that doesn't mean they're not still there.

A crunch to my right pulls my attention. It could have been nothing. A sly fox out of his den looking for food or snow dropping from a limb up above. But a snap accompanies the first sound, and Cinder's ears perk.

Shit.

I don't stick around to see what's making a racket in the brush. Taking off at a run, I weave between the trees, trying to keep my tread light and stealthy. My adrenaline peaks, pulsing through my veins and pushing me to run faster. A low-hanging branch comes out of nowhere and catches me across the cheek. The rough bark scrapes my cold skin. I'm frozen down to the bone, even with the constant movement. I don't slow my stride to worry about it. It's nothing a little antiseptic ointment can't fix when I get to the shed.

We're getting closer. Down the embankment and over the next hill, a small forgotten hunting shed sits camouflaged against the forest backdrop. My feet hit a patch of ice, sending them out from under me and my ass right to the ground. I slide against dirt and rocks, trying to gain traction, but the slope is too steep to stop my body's momentum.

Something sharp stabs into my thigh as I come to a stop at the bottom. Cinder sits beside me, whining deep in her diaphragm, while checking me over. She keeps an eye on our surroundings. Ears pointed straight to the sky, listening intently.

Pushing from the ground, I feel the giant rip in my leggings on the back of my thigh. Bright red blood drips from a deep three-inch cut. What bullshit, these are my favorite leggings. I pout before quickly remembering that's a minor detail of my current situation.

Thankfully, the incline over the next ridge isn't as steep, but I still crawl on my hands and knees to ensure I don't slide right back down. Cinder has no such qualms and beats me to the top, waiting to make the last couple hundred-yard dash to safety.

I don't pick up the same pace I had before my fall. No, now my leg's fucked up. My ass is no doubt bruised, my hands are covered in filth, and my lungs burn from exhaustion. I hobble along, picking the direct path, even though I should double around the back, especially if someone is following me.

I'm smart enough to stop before entering. Grabbing my Glock, I chamber a bullet and lift my hands in the direction of the front door. It's not locked. We never saw the point in it, especially in a situation like this. Everything we've stocked in here is hidden beneath the floorboards anyway.

My frozen digits wrap around the doorknob awkwardly; turning it slowly, I push it open just a crack. Cinder shoves past my leg, entering to sniff around the space ahead of me. When she barks once, I know it's safe to enter.

Inching past the door, I shut it quietly and slide the locks into the place. I'm engulfed in darkness.

"Cinder, come." Her paws pad against the wooden floorboards. When her dense, warm body leans into my leg, I feel a slight assurance of safety.

Pulling in a deep, steadying breath, I reach for my phone. The screen lights the moment I flip it over. Call after call, text after text, and a few voicemails nestle on the screen.

"Oh boy, here we go," I say to the empty room.

"Yeah, here we go."

“Fuck!” screeches from my throat as I launch my phone into the air, whirling in the direction of the voice hidden in the darkened corner. Cinder growls at my feet, inching closer to the shadowed figure.

“Cinder,” his command is sharp, and she knows who we share a space with, just as I do. She doesn’t leave my side; she’s my dog, but we’ve both trained her, and she knows better than to growl at him.

My body relaxes only because I know there’s no actual danger. I’m not going to die. But it doesn’t mean I’ll leave this shack unscathed from his protective wrath.

He’s quick to flick a lantern on, and the muted glow brightens the small space just enough to see each other. I don’t know how I missed another body here, but it makes sense why Cinder didn’t warn me; she wouldn’t see him as a threat.

In two strides, he’s on top of me. His large hand wraps possessively around my throat, but his thumb rubs soothingly against my pulse point. He’s pissed and shoving it aside to take stock of my body. First, the scratch across my cheek, then the state of my clothes covered in dirt from the hillside. When he’s satisfied I’m fine, he lifts his dark eyes before his lips crash against mine, jolting me back from his power.

He demands entrance, fighting to regain a semblance of control from a situation where there was none. He’s never forgiven himself for my kidnapping. Even though we both know my father would have done it eventually, regardless of Harkin’s involvement. His men took the opportunity and made the job about revenge instead of a simple retrieval. They got what was coming to them.

A moan builds in the back of my throat as my body connects with the hard cabin wall. Harkin presses in tightly, leaving no room between us. It’s like he wants to crawl inside my body and fuse our two souls so we’ll never be parted again. The back of my legs connect with the wall, forcing a hiss of pain past my lips.

He immediately stops his assault, looking down at me with concerned eyes. His pupils are blown, and his lips are swelling. “Turn around, little one,” he demands.

I listen, shifting my weight to face the wall behind me and expose the injury. “It’s fine. I think it just needs to be cleaned up and bandaged.”

“Dammit, Keira. Why didn’t you say anything?” He huffs.

My shoulders pitch, and I turn back to face him. He’s calmed slightly, but there’s still a storm in his eyes, and he hasn’t even heard what had me running through the woods in the first place. If he’s had time to check the cameras, he should be well aware by now.

“Lay on the table, and let me look at this.”

“Don’t you think we should go? What about—” My question is cut short by a growl.

“Get. On. The. Table.”

“Yes, Sir,” I sass back.

“Don’t fucking test me right now, Keira.”

I know I shouldn’t; he’s worried and most likely pissed at himself for leaving me alone in a place where we’ve found a moment of calm over the last few months. He let his guard down, and the second he did, something went haywire. At this rate, I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t chain us together after this.

Lying flat on my stomach across the dusty table, I let him fuss over the cut. I hear the familiar snap of a knife being flipped open before the fabric of my leggings is cut away. I let out a deep sigh. Now, there’s no way I’m mending them.

“We’ll get you a new pair. Stop squirming,” he commands.

That happens when you spend the last three months hibernating in a remote cabin in the Colorado mountains. Once the snow hit, I swear it didn’t stop, and we had to rely on what was already stocked for us.

Days, weeks, and months passed with just Cinder and us. Harkin was nose down in his computer for weeks when we first arrived, trying to track my father, to no avail. He’d kept in close contact with James back in New York, who was doing the footwork there to try to put the puzzle pieces together.

We’d had a sanctuary of sorts, but with warming temperatures comes melting snow and trouble in the form of outsiders. A sharp sting has me pushing onto my forearms and looking back over my shoulder.

“Lay your ass down. Tightening the muscle is making it bleed more.”

“Stop biting my head off,” I fume under my breath. Not even a second passes before a hard smack comes down on my ass.

“You’re testing my patience right now, sweetness. Let me get you cleaned up so we can talk.”

I huff out my annoyance, but it just makes him laugh as he works to clean and bandage the wound. With the last tearing of the tape, he steps away and grabs a bottle of water from the go bag.

“Here, take a sip and wash off your hands.”

I do as I’m told, having gotten used to letting him lead the way. Something I’d never expected I’d be able to do. But he’s earned my trust time and time again. He’s slowly

dismantled my walls, and I'm thriving as a we instead of a me .

Wincing the moment my body sits upright on the table, my leg pressed against the hard surface, I jump down, letting my shoes hit the floor and lean against it instead.

“Thank you.”

He leans into me, dropping a quick kiss on my forehead, and I can't help but inhale the smokey fresh scent that's become his. Staying close, he leaves little room between us, waiting for me to open my eyes and regale him with the story of what happened.

“Did you watch the cameras?”

“Haven't had time. But I cleared the house. There were only two of them. They looked like your father's men, but I sent photos off to James to see if he knew who they were. I'll feed them through my system when we get back.”

“Get back? You want to stay here even though they know where we are?” Surprise laces my voice.

“No. But we have time to go back and pack up before we hit the road. Now tell me what happened?”

I tell him everything, though it's not much of a story to tell. There was no altercation. They never found me. Our escape plan worked like a dream until I was in the woods with ill-prepared footwear.

“And in all that time, you couldn't have at least hit answer on my call so I could hear you breathing?” The fire in his eyes has dulled to a smolder.

“You have my location and could see me moving along with Cinder.” I try to soothe him further.

“Sweetness, that could have meant a whole slew of things. It’s not the same as hearing you.”

I drop my chin, knowing he’s right. But I was too worried about getting caught by one of the men. “There just wasn’t time. I’m sorry.” I pop up on my toes and bring my lips to his softly. It was just supposed to be an apology, a token of my sincerity. But he wants more.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

TWO

HARKIN

US AGAINST THE WORLD - Chris Grey

Her cold lips land on mine, and my body responds automatically. She's the air I breathe, day in and day out. Without her—my thought stops there, unable to even bear the idea. Losing Alina was one thing. I thought her death killed me, but all it did was tear down the man she knew to rebuild someone better in his wake. For Keira, it would mean an all-out war before I climbed my body into the coffin next to hers. There is no me without her.

Pulling her closer, I fuse her front with mine, breaking our kiss and sinking my nose into the hollow of her neck, drawing in her scent. I needed to feel her skin against mine, erase the last hour of our lives. She's lucky I was almost back when the alert from the security system hit my phone. She's right. The first thing I did was pull up both of their locations and watch to see where they were. By then, their dots were off in the woods, assuring me she'd gotten out of the cabin and was likely heading for our meeting spot.

When I pulled down the drive, not bothering to hide my arrival, one man was coming around the side of the cabin. He yelled something in Italian before raising his gun in my direction, but his friend came clambering out the front door, stealing his attention for a second too long.

My gun popped off, hitting him square in the chest. His stocky body hit the snow

with no sound at all. The saving grace of being high in the mountains, we didn't have neighbors to worry about. And even if we did, a gunshot wouldn't be something to think twice about up here.

His friend got off a couple of shots, pinging their car instead of mine or me. When I slid behind their SUV, dropping to the ground and onto my back, my next bullet took out his kneecap. He fell forward, tumbling down the front stairs. One quick double tap to the head silenced the scuffle. The time in the mountains training with Keira not only perfected my aim, but erased any hesitation about killing someone.

Her hands push under my shirt and up my chest, cooling my skin. She needs me as much as I want her. I can feel it in her desperate touch. See it in her heady gaze.

“Strip, little one.”

“It's freezing in here,” she protests.

My eyebrows raise, my lips tipping at the corner. We've come a long way with her submission, but my girl holds firm to her obstinance. She wouldn't be her if she didn't.

“Don't make me repeat myself.”

I step back, giving her space to toe off her mud-covered runners. Her fingers grip the hem of her skintight running shirt before slowly peeling it over her head. Her sports bra follows, exposing supple breasts on full display to jostle as she shoves her leggings down her hips and to the floor.

She shifts back and forth as goosebumps rise along her skin. Her dusty rose nipples peak, growing stiff from the cold air. I groan in appreciation at the sight.

Wrapping my hands around her waist, I lift and set her ass on the table. “Lean back, sweetness.”

Her elbows drop with a thud. She looks like a feast set out just for me, and I’m a man starved. Dropping to my knees before her, she throws her legs over my shoulders, whining as the anticipation of what’s to come takes hold in her mind.

My tongue glides across the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh, stopping at the apex just before her sex. I drop a kiss and repeat the assault on the opposite leg, this time biting down and licking away the sharp sting.

“Harkin, please,” she begs so sweetly, the only time she’s genuinely pliant for me.

“Mm, you should have answered the phone,” I remind her.

She lets out a frustrated huff and rocks her hips toward my face.

“Taste me.”

There it is. What she really wants. I blow lightly up and down her bare pussy. Her squirming continues, and I can’t stop the chuckle it draws from me. My cock stiffens, pushing to break free from its denim prison.

When I finally draw my tongue through her folds and flick her clit, she arches into me, sighing at the first wave of pleasure. I work her body up until she’s a whimpering mess on the table. Just as her legs tighten and start to shake, I shove two fingers deep inside her tight cunt. The perfect timing has her clamping around me as her first orgasm rips through her body, drenching my digits.

One isn’t enough.

I don't stop working my fingers in and out. As she comes down from her high and relaxes against the table, I add a third finger, stretching her tight hole. She doesn't stiffen, adjusting quickly, but this is hardly the most my girl can take.

Using my free hand, I pop the button on my jeans and shove them down, letting them fall to the floor. My dick stands at attention, the head beading with pre-cum. Slowing my fingers in her pussy, I pull them free. They're coated in her arousal, and I use it to jerk my cock.

Her heavy eyes drop, watching my hand work up and down my shaft.

"Is this what you want?"

Eyes zoned in, she nods. The tip of her tongue peeks out, disappearing quickly as her teeth bite down on her bottom lip. There's a hunger in her eyes that tells of a predator lying in wait for its prey.

I notch the tip at her entrance, pushing in an inch before stopping and looking up to meet her gaze. She's always beautiful, but this right here—her pupils blown wide, her cheeks tinged pink, while she's naked and spread before me—is the image I'll have burned in my psyche for the rest of my days.

"More," she whispers.

I slam home, shaking the table on its unsteady legs. "Fuuuck. This pussy feels amazing."

Shoving my arms under her thighs, I pull her up and lift her off the table. She grabs hold of my shoulders in shock, wrapping her arms around my neck to secure her body in my grasp. The second she does, my thrusts resume, pounding into her tight flesh and chasing my release. When she cries out at the punishing pace, it only spurs me on

faster.

Slamming her down on my dick, her muscles spasm, tightening around me in a vice-like grip.

“Harkin,” she screams, throwing her head back and exposing her neck.

I lean in, biting down, branding her over and over, across her chest, and down to her breasts. Rutting one more time, I come, shoving up and pulling her down against me all in one, securing my load deep inside her. It’s just another invisible mark I’ll leave behind.

Our rapid breathing slows as I set her back on the table and lean against it, my cock softening inside her but not ready to pull free.

“I’m okay,” she says, breaking the silence.

I don’t respond, instead nodding and brushing a soft kiss on her forehead. We should get back; it’ll be dark soon, and the last thing we need is to get lost in this cold. When we step out of the forest, back at the cabin, I eye the mound of freshly packed snow at the edge of the clearing. The grounds were too hard to dispose of the bodies, but I wasn’t about to leave them out for anyone to find.

Will the wildlife find them and do the job for me? One can only hope. James is aware and told me he’d take care of it if not.

“So, we’re heading back to New York?” Keira asks as she towels off from her quick shower.

I’ve packed our bags, and they’re waiting in the living room, ready to be loaded into the car. Some of the gear will have to stay locked in the basement, but it should be

safe. Our addition bounds into the room at the sound of her keeper's voice. She drops to the ground next to Keira in a watchful pose.

"Eventually," I finally answer.

"Is it safe? I mean, if they found us here, there's no question they have people watching the apartment in Brooklyn."

"We're not going back to Brooklyn. You still can't talk to Stace, but Alina's daughter isn't doing well, and I thought you might want to be closer."

"Not at the expense of our safety. She might be my niece, Harkin, but any help I can give her needs to be done from afar. Speaking of which, have the results come back yet?"

It's taken longer than typical for a DNA test. When I realized Alina was still taking her to a public doctor and not receiving private care, James infiltrated his way into the clinic. I'm unsure how he collected the sample, but it was good enough for me to send mine and Keira's in for matching.

I was determined to keep our location a secret in case the kit was somehow intercepted between here and New York. It needed to go on a little journey, throwing off anyone encountering it. Because of that, James only received word from the lab a couple of weeks ago, and I've been sitting on the results. Not that I'd told Keira that.

I draw a deep breath; this isn't the best time to get into this. I haven't checked to see what the results say. You'd think I'd want to know immediately and make that clean break I've been eagerly awaiting. But the slightest bit of doubt has crept into my head since I received the email from James. What if it comes back, and she's somehow mine? I can't trust myself on how I'll react.

“No, not yet. But they should be here any day,” I strain.

I don’t want to lie to her. Our relationship didn’t start on an honest foot from either of us, but we’ve come a long way. This just has the potential to change everything, and I’m not ready for that.

“Come on, let’s get you dressed so we can hit the road,” I say, breaking the unease in the room.

“I can dress myself. You’re only needed when it comes to removing the clothes.” She winks at me, ever the playful minx.

“Fine. Meet me in the living room. We need to leave soon, before it gets too dark. But, little one, I’d take my sweet time dressing you if we weren’t in a hurry.” I leave her with that and call Cinder to follow.

The headlights of a passing car shine brightly through the windshield. Fucking asshole didn’t turn off his brights. The invasion wakes Keira, and she stirs in the passenger seat. Cinder snores loudly in the back. Cracking the lid to another energy drink, I tip it back, chugging down the excess caffeine I’ve been running on the last couple of days.

“Do you want me to take over? You can’t keep running on fumes,” she chides, her tone still laced with sleep.

“The last thing we need is to get pulled over.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ve gotten much better, thank you very much.”

Laughing at her confidence in that statement, I say, “That might be the case, sweetness, but we still can’t take the risk. I’ll be fine.”

The hours pass, more miles through the dark, speeding by in a blur of shadowed landscapes. We cross the New York state line when dawn finally crests above the horizon. But instead of heading back to the city, like my girl would love to do, we proceed upstate toward Albany.

James is set to meet with us once we get to the short-term rental I secured through a falsified LLC. God only knows how long we'll be there, but it's closer to ground zero. Domenico's bound to pop his head up eventually.

From what James has reported, his empire is in the hands of the man who carted Alina off, Marcello. It seems Keira has more family than she anticipated. Yet, another thing I've kept from her these last few months. But the truth about everything is due to come out. Once we've settled into our new place and I've taken the time to make sure she's fully relaxed.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

THREE

KEIRA

MATCH MADE IN HELL - Dutch Melrose, benny Mayne

The small Craftsman-style cottage we pull in front of sits back from the road surrounded by more trees. It gives the illusion of privacy, but so did the snow-covered mountains of Colorado. The truth is, we're back and the hiding needs to stop. There are too many unanswered questions. The biggest yet, where my father is hiding and, secondly, what the hell he wants from me.

Harkin put a damper on his plans when he showed up like a white knight, with his band of masked men. It still blows my mind when I focus too hard on the whole encounter. I have a family. A father who knew I was alive this entire time but chose to stay away. And a sister, a twin I thought dead the last few years. Not to mention, the elephant in every room Harkin and I are in when the topic comes up surrounding my niece, potentially his daughter.

I know he's sitting on the results, waiting for the right time to unveil yet another secret. When James emailed me with my results to see if I was a donor match for my niece, Sofia, I'd asked if Harkin's results were in too. James didn't think twice about telling me, probably assuming Harkin was on his way to share them with me anyway. That was weeks ago.

His only redemption was that I didn't think he'd taken the step of opening them. When I'd asked him before we left, I could see the hesitation in his eyes, the truth

fighting to break free, but he decided to keep quiet. I'm not going to push; in the end it's his business and I want him to trust me enough to open them with me. But our relationship will be tested if he doesn't come clean soon.

Whether he likes it or not, I am a match. My niece is in dire need of a bone marrow transplant, and while I assumed it'd be true as her mother's twin, you never know. I am curious as to why Alina can't donate to her own daughter. Another secret for another day.

"You coming in or what?" Harkin calls, already standing on the small front porch with our bags. I don't remember him getting out of the car, too caught up in the mess that's become my life over the last year.

Leave it to Alina to throw a wrench in my happily ever after. I should have seen it coming; girls like me don't get happily ever afters, where the prince swoops in and saves the day. We get thrown to the wolves and, if we're lucky, we survive the fight from the pits to freedom. But the fight leaves us jaded, if not prepared for the next unexpected complication.

The car door shuts behind me, echoing against the quiet day. Stepping through the front door, I suck in a deep breath. We're one step closer to regaining our lives. Not that I think my life will ever go back to being the lonely girl, working at the airport.

How does one go back to such a mundane life once she's learned her father is the head of a crime family. From what Harkin's learned, it's not just New York. That's his kingdom. His reach runs across the US and his connections are deeply seated back in his family's home country.

My family's home country, at least half of it.

"Earth to Keira," Harkin says, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around

my waist. “What’s got you so wrapped up in your head, you’re walking around like a zombie, sweetness?”

“My mind’s moving a mile a minute, being back in New York. We might not be in the city, but it’s like crossing the state line sent everything rushing back, tenfold,” I answer, staring out the big bay windows at the back of the house off the kitchen. His arms tighten further, pressing my back into his hard chest, grounding me to the moment.

“We’re going to figure everything out, Keira. I promise.” His lips skim across my neck as he whispers that heavy declaration in my ear.

“We might know more than we did three months ago, but we don’t have a plan. I don’t want to run and hide anymore. This can’t be what you want for your life. You didn’t sign up for this insanity when you met me.”

“Neither did you.”

His arm reaches up, fingers grasping my chin and tilting my gaze to look back at him. “There is no more you or I, there is only us. And we will figure this out together. I don’t care if it’s another two months or two years, Keira.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t know that I can handle this for another two years.”

“You could. I have no doubts about that. But we’re close, sweetness. Once James gets here, we’ll sit down and make plans for our next move. Your father’s here.”

I spin in his arm and look up at him, mouth agape. “You found him?”

“Finally.”

“Why didn’t you...” The doorbell rings, interrupting my question.

“That’ll be James. Perfect timing. Now, I’ll only have to go over this once. I’ll let him in. Why don’t you see if they have anything to drink here.”

“Oh, send me off to the kitchen because I’m a woman.” I huff and roll my eyes at him.

“Little one, it’s been a long day of driving. But don’t think I won’t make that ass red if you roll those beautiful eyes at me again,” he threatens, with a quick smack to my ass, before walking back toward the front door.

I poke my tongue out at his back, staring after him.

“You’re playing with fire, baby. Keep it up!” he calls back at me, never turning around.

Damn man knows me too well.

Their footsteps sound down the hall. I pause at the fridge, looking at the emptiness within. Looks like we’ll need to send for groceries or pop into town if we plan on staying here for any length of time.

The footsteps pick up and I swing around right in time for a body to collide with mine, shoving me back into the open fridge. My brain stutters, trying to make sense of James welcoming me like this, but the long blonde hair caught in my mouth straightens that thought process.

“Stace?” I say in disbelief.

“Keira, oh my god, babe. I’ve missed you so much.”

I tighten my arms around her tall frame, before pushing her away to get a glimpse of my best friend. “But...” I shake myself. “I missed you too. But what are you doing here? How?”

Harkin and James step into the kitchen. They must have stopped in the hall to have words.

Stace leans in toward me, dipping her lips next to my ear. “I think I cracked the big guy.” Throwing a thumb over her shoulder, she points toward the guys.

James, she must be talking about him. His eyes are on us, well, not us, her.

Holy shit, is something going on between them?

“Surprise,” Harkin says when his eyes meet mine. But I can see it there, clear as day, he wasn’t aware of this little addition any more than I was.

“Keira,” James says with a small chin nod.

“Hey, James, good to see you again.” I give him a knowing look, but his mask doesn’t break. That’s fine. Stace can’t keep shit to herself, and I’ll figure out what’s going on between them soon enough.

“Any luck on finding something?” Harkin asks, breaking the tension brewing between the four of us.

“Nothing. We’ll have to order take out for today and go into town for groceries tomorrow.”

“Stacey and James can go. We’re not leaving the house unless necessary.”

“Fine,” I say with a huff. Another day, another place, but I’m still locked away in an artfully decorated prison.

“Why don’t we take this to the living room; it’ll be more comfortable, until the food arrives,” Harkin instructs, pointing in the direction on the other side of the kitchen wall.

James goes without hesitation, stopping to grab Stace by the arm and drag her away with him. I’m shocked when my friend doesn’t blanch at being manhandled. I watch after them disappearing, too stunned to notice my own demanding man walk up behind me.

His arms encircle my waist, as his chin rests on my shoulder. “What’s got you all pissed off, little one?”

Dropping my head back on to his shoulder, I let the soft chuckle pass between us. Of course, he could read that from one word. “I’m tired of it, Harkin.”

“It’s almost over.”

“Is it, though?” I ask indignantly, turning to face him.

His rough, callused hand comes up to settle around my throat. He doesn’t squeeze, just holds me in place, his thumb pushing up against my chin to maneuver my gaze to his.

“He’s not only back. I found him, too.”

I let a gasp fall between us. “When?” I whisper.

“Come into the other room, and I’ll share the news with everyone.”

His fingers tighten around my throat, pulling me forward until my body is pressed firmly against him. I love this side of him. It disarms and settles me. Makes me want to relax and throw my cares away. Give all the stress and worry over to him, but the anxiety of his news lingers regardless of all that.

“I’ve got you, sweetness.” Another promise, as he claims my lips and dispels any other thoughts from my mind. I melt into him, wanting more, but he pulls away too quickly for my liking. Whining in protest, I push myself into his palm, choking myself in the process. But I make it back to his lips and it’s worth the difficulty to breathe.

When his teeth nip at my bottom lip, a moan builds in my chest.

“Are you guys coming or what?” Stace yells from the other room, followed by something muffled I can’t make out.

“Tell them to leave,” I beg him, opening my eyes and seeing my lust reflected in his dark stare.

“I’ve created a monster.” He chuckles and shakes his head. Dropping his hold on my throat, he grips my hand and pulls me from the kitchen, dragging my electrified and needy body behind him.

Girls get blue balls too.

“Jesus, what took you two so long,” Stace says without turning around on the couch. I don’t miss the tight squeeze of James’s hand on her thigh, the silent warning blatant for my eyes to see.

Harkin drops into the leather wingback chair that reminds me of the ones from his office. I don’t bother finding my own seat. Instead, I follow him, dropping into his

lap and pressing my ass into his hardness, wiggling just enough to get his attention.

If he wants to leave me wet and desperate, I plan to make this conversation as painful for him to get through as it will be for me.

“Keira.” His low timber sends shivers down my spine. “Behave.”

“Never.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

FOUR

HARKIN

Blood//Water - grandson

“Domenico’s been spotted in the city.” I break the silence hanging over the group. Keira stiffens in my lap, even though I just told her in the kitchen. It’s been months of dragging the internet and using all my contacts to locate the man. In the end, my system pinged him, spotted by multiple cameras in the city. The ease with which he moved through his trip made me realize he was done hiding. If I’d found him, he wanted to be found. He was back in the game and ready to play.

The only problem was we still didn’t know his endgame. If it was just for Alina’s profit, why all the theatrics? Keira would have been open to helping her sister without being kidnapped. She didn’t need to be put through the shock of finding out her father had been watching her. And certainly not that the twin she so desperately wanted to have a relationship with growing up was still alive. Alina showed her true colors immediately, and those dreams that Keira had held tightly were crushed.

“So, what do we do now?” Keira asks.

I look over at James. I’m grateful that his cold mask of indifference is set in place. It’s time to tell Keira about my results, but not in front of everyone. I don’t know how she’s going to react.

“We watch and wait. If you want to contact Alina, we can figure that out. It hasn’t

been hard to keep an eye on her and Sofia.”

“But if I do?”

“Yeah, she’s likely to tell Domenico. Or shit, she probably wouldn’t even have to. I’m sure his men are watching over her like a hawk. At least Marcello is.”

“I’m a match, Harkin. If I can help, I need to do it,” she says with all the sincerity in the world.

“I know, sweetness.” Dropping a gentle kiss on her hair, I draw her in closer to me. The rawness of the conversation drives away the earlier lust. “I can set you up with an encrypted email. That way, you can reach out to her. Domenico might find out, but that doesn’t mean he needs to know where you are. When the time comes for the procedure, we’ll figure it out.”

“There’s something else,” James says, sitting forward on the couch. “I’ve done more digging into your dad’s connection with Domenico. After everything that happened, Domenico reached out to him, trying to shake him down for information.” Pausing, his eyes train on mine. “He’s missing, and your mom’s gone off the deep end.”

“What!” I jolt forward, almost sending Keira to the floor. She adjusts and lets me stand before she returns to the leather chair.

I pace back and forth between everyone, where a coffee table should be. I haven’t spoken to my parents in months with everything going on. I didn’t think to check in on them. It would have taken two seconds to log into their security system, but Keira was more important.

“When?” My tone runs cold, and James hesitates to answer. Certainly not out of fear, but he knows he fucked up. “When, James?”

“About a month ago.”

A small ceramic sculpture sits on the side table next to Keira. Before I can think, my hand grips around it, and it hurtles across the room, crashing into the wall. Keira and Stacey jump in their seats, but James just stares at me.

“I’m handling it,” he finally adds.

“I don’t fucking care. You should have told me the moment it happened. Where’s my mom?”

“She’s cooped up at home these days. There was an incident at the club, and she was asked not to return until they could speak with your father.”

“So, everyone knows?” But that can’t be the case because if my father had been reported missing, it would have made it online somewhere. And while I wasn’t checking in on the cameras, one of my systems would have alerted me to that news. “No, that’s not it.”

“You’re right, no one knows. Your mom hasn’t reported anything, and I’m not even sure she understands the full scope of the situation.”

“Harkin, you need to call her. Get a burner or whatever, but call her,” Keira says, leaning forward in her chair to wrap her delicate fingers around my wrist.

Her touch soothes my racing heart, allowing my thoughts an anchor to steady the raging sea of emotions vying for my attention. Logic starts to settle into place. I draw in a breath, placing my hand on her shoulder and giving her a thankful squeeze.

“Why don’t you guys figure out what takeout they have around here,” I suggest as Keira looks up at me. I’m not trying to dismiss her from the conversation, but I need

to have some words with James after this huge revelation.

The quick bite at the tip of her tongue to say something mouthy back sits unsaid between us. I drop my mask for her, staring deep into her narrowed gaze. She closes her eyes with a lengthy sigh before unfolding her legs and standing.

Her soft lips press to my cheek, and then the girls head to the kitchen. I tilt my head to the side, motioning for James to follow me. There's an office at the back of the modest home with double doors that lead out to the wrap-around porch.

The late afternoon air is crisp when I push the doors open and sit in one of the wooden deck chairs. James drops down next to me, and I take in the scenery. Time passes as I sort all the shit that's been laid on the table before turning his way.

“Well, you're handling it, so what do you know?”

“I think Keira's right. You should talk to your mom. I called and tried to get information out of her, but she was tight-lipped, even under the influence of whatever was running through her bloodstream.”

“Jesus.” I rub my forehead and drag my hand down my face.

“You think it was Domenico?”

“I'd bet my life savings on it. Your dad tried to warn you. For all Domenico knows, he's the one who tipped you off to Keira's possible location. Do I think he's dead? Not likely, but I think Domenico will try to use him to bait you out of hiding.”

I let that sink in. It was my first thought, too. “Then he's a fool.” I bite out. “I'd never put Keira in danger, not even for my father.”

“I suspected as much. Does she know?” James asks.

“Know what?”

“How much you love her.”

He says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. But those three little words have yet to be uttered by either of us. Of course, I love her. I’ve loved her from the moment she stormed into my life and became the only thing my mind would think about. But it’s different for her, and I don’t want to push her into saying something she’s not ready for.

“That’s not important right now,” I tell him.

“Don’t fuck that shit up, Harkin. That girl loves you, but knowing her, she’s waiting for you to say something before she tears down that final wall.”

“Enough about my love life. What the hell is going on with you and Stacey?” I pry.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You showed up here with her.”

“She wouldn’t stop hounding me about Keira,” he tries to justify.

“And the tension between you two? The firm hand?”

“Nothing’s happened,” he says again, a little less confident.

“Yet,” I mumble, but he doesn’t argue. I leave it; what he does and who he does it with are none of my concerns. But Stacey is a handful. I’ve seen it firsthand.

“Do you have any leads on where my father is being held?”

“Nothing’s popped up yet, but I hope your mom’s hiding something. If it’s Domenico, he likely gave her instructions that she can only share with you. But since you’ve been MIA?—”

I cut him off. “You should have told me. I could have reached out from Colorado. It would have been no different than calling from here. You fucked up.”

“I needed to sort some shit before you risked your location. But now that it’s compromised, the timing is better.”

The doorbell rings throughout the house and into the backyard. James and I are on our feet, rushing through the office and down the hall, past the kitchen and into the entryway.

Both girls stand at the door, arms weighed down with takeout bags, staring at us with amused grins.

“Dinner?” Stacey finally breaks the tensions rolling between the four of us. She passes, and James is on her trail.

Keira slides up next to me. “It’s fine, Harkin. They left the bags at the front door, and I waited until they were in their car and gone to grab them.”

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pull her to my side and drop a kiss on her temple. “You still should have waited for us.”

“You worry too much.”

“One of us has to.”

We dish out the Chinese food and settle in the living room. Turning on the TV, the news blares to life. I'm about to flip past the channel in search of a movie, but the story catches my attention.

“Greyson Global is facing a legal inquiry on five counts of money laundering. We were unable to reach the company’s spokesperson for a comment. However, a source tells us the company’s CEO, Scott Greyson, hasn’t been seen for months. Was he given a heads-up that this legal battle was on the horizon? Stay tuned as we follow the story as it develops.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

FIVE

KEIRA

Secrets - Omit, Ordell, Rock Jansen

All eyes swing in Harkin's direction. His face looks ashen with disbelief as he sits there in silence. I grab both our plates and set them on the side table before he ends up on the floor.

"You still want to bet that life savings he was kidnapped?" he asks James, breaking the stilted silence.

"Everything might not be as it seems. Domenico has connections. Plus, when did you start listening to the news and believing the shit they spew?"

Harkin nods, jumping to his feet and walking toward the exit. Before he can make it, he turns back to the group. "Are you guys staying here tonight?"

"Just tonight. I rented us a place down the street, but I figured the girls would want some time together," James says, as if said girls aren't in the same room and can speak for themselves.

"There's plenty of space. I'll be in the office. I have some work to do." Then he's gone, and James quickly follows behind.

"Well, that was intense," Stace says, confusion written all over her face.

“Story of my life for the last few months.”

Intense doesn't even begin to touch the tip of the iceberg of the shit she still doesn't know. Or at least I don't think she does. James doesn't seem the type to go telling other people's business, even if that other person is my extremely determined, annoying best friend. She did get him to bring her here, after all.

“How long are you guys planning on staying in the area? Don't you need to work?”

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. “I haven't worked since you left. You know I only worked there because of you. I don't need to with my brand deals. Not to mention that trust fund I try not to bring up.”

It's so easy to forget Stacey is a trust-fund baby. Besides her fantastic apartment in Manhattan and extensive high-end wardrobe, nothing else screams New York's elite, but she is. She did the European boarding schools, the highly outdated cotillion ceremony, and even modeled for a few years. Yet, at the end of the day, we still somehow clicked.

“But what about you? What are you going to do when all of this is over? Hate to break it to you, babe, but it's not like they've saved your position at the airline.”

“Honestly, I have no fucking clue. How do you go back to working a nine-to-five after being kidnapped, finding out your dad is the Don of a mafia family right here in New York, you've been shot at and drugged? Oh yeah, and the twin sister you thought was dead is still very much alive and wants the man you love.”

“Oh my god!” Stacey squeaks.

“Shit! I didn't mean to tell you all that. It's a lot.”

“No, not all that craziness. Which we will get back to in a moment. You’re in love with Harkin!” she screams.

I slap my hand over her mouth, eyes bulging in stern warning. “Are you going to calm down?”

Stace nods, her smile drawn wide under my hand. I can tell by how her flushed cheeks bulge. Her shoulders do a little dance of excitement.

“You haven’t told him?” she asks incredulously. “You guys spent months together, alone, in the woods. What the hell were you doing up there?”

I think back over the last couple of months of our seclusion, getting to know every inch of each other, in and out of the bedroom. It was easy to forget the madness our lives had become when it was just us two. We’d spend our days training, with him pushing me to get stronger in the gym while I taught him everything I knew about the sizable armory James had stashed away there. Our nights were filled with him teaching me the basics of computer warfare and the delicious rewards by the fire when I’d retain the crazy instructions he gave me.

Occasionally, I’d dwelled on the fact that I’d dragged him into this mess with my family. But he never let me forget that if we’d never met on the curb in front of his apartment, it would have been in my father’s office regardless, with his connection to Alina.

Stace’s hand shakes my knee. “Hello, earth to Keira.”

“No, I haven’t told him yet. But he knows.”

“Oh? How do you figure? He’s a man, after all. They typically need a hand-drawn map to find something in the fridge, and you think he knows your feelings without

you telling him directly.”

“It’s just—” I think about how Harkin and I are together. The way he anticipates my needs, first and always. It was there before we left for Colorado, budding in the middle of all the chaos erupting around us in New York. Being alone together allowed it to blossom, and we didn’t need the words spoken to know they were true. Or that’s what I kept telling myself. Because deep down, I knew the people you love always die.

“It’s not the time yet, with everything going on.”

Stacey scoffs at my brush off. “It’s exactly the right time, if you ask me. So, if my vote counts, which I one hundred percent think it should, I say you should tell him sooner than later. You never know what could happen tomorrow.”

And that right there lies the problem.

“You know what I really think?” she asks, as if she held her opinion back in the first place.

“Do I want to know?” I laugh, knowing anything could come out of her mouth.

“We need wine,” she states.

“Uhm, too bad there isn’t any here. Also, I haven’t had a drink in months.”

“Well then, what an even better reason to have one. We’re celebrating that you’re back, sort of.” She pops off the couch and runs for the hall. Disappearing for a few minutes, she comes back with two glasses of red in her hands. “I came prepared.”

“God, I fucking missed you.”

I enjoy the wine as Stacey fills me in on everything she's been up to over the last couple of months. She told me she gave me a month without a word, then started showing up at Harkin's until she ran into James. She recognized him as my driver and bugged him every day for another month until he finally broke and sat down to have a conversation with her. By the time she's done regaling me, I've finished my second glass to her bottle and a half and we're both ready for bed.

Walking her up to the spare room, I get her situated. I contemplate joining her in bed like we used to because, knowing Harkin, he'll be up all night working on whatever he and James are trying to crack. But in the end, I trudge over to the main bedroom. Cinder lays curled up in a ball on the end of the bed. Her spot since she was a puppy, as much as Harkin hates it.

After months of not drinking, the two glasses of wine swirl through my blood, clouding my thoughts. Moving through the bedroom, I strip down, leaving pieces of clothing in my wake. The oversized clawfoot tub under the frosted arched window calls to me.

I flip on the hot water, dousing the bottom of the tub in the bubble bath and oils provided by the rental company. Slowly, I dip my body into the steaming water, relaxing quickly against the padded headrest. The scent of vanilla and peppermint fills the bathroom, and I wish I had thought of dimming the lights and turning on some music.

Left alone with my thoughts is never a great place to be. My anxiety quickly builds, regardless of the calm state I'm in. It never matters how much Harkin assures me we'll figure this out together. My self-reliance from years of being alone has systematically engrained a need to figure shit out immediately.

I could go to my father, keep Harkin out of it, and finally figure out what the hell his end game is. But all that will do is cause mass chaos for my man. He'll never let me

go now. I'd have to drug him, tie him down, and become a ghost to disappear from him again. And if I'm honest with myself, that's the last thing I want.

Harkin is it. He's the one I'll always want. It doesn't matter if he has a daughter with my sister. It doesn't matter if my father has other intentions for me. None of it matters because I would rather take my last breath than separate from him.

I draw in a deep breath, sliding beneath the calm edge of glassy water. The weightlessness washes away my mind's need to piece everything together. When I break through the surface and settle back, a hand slips against my skin, pushing a strand of hair out of my face.

"There you are." Harkin's warm tone surrounds me.

I purr like a cat raised from a nap in the sun. "Join me?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, his hand swishes through the cooling water. "How about we take this to bed instead?" he asks, extending his hand to me for a safe exit.

I take it, and he pulls my body from the warm depths. Water cascades down my relaxed muscles. He wraps me in a soft towel before drawing me into his arms. I nuzzle into his neck, inhaling his familiar scent that I could pick out of a blind lineup.

This is the side of Harkin that makes me stay. Not the way he handles situations with a firm hand, not the money or the tech genius. It's the man who takes care of me when no one else has since my mom died. I feel the sting of her loss every day, but he lessens it. Hour by hour, day by day, I've learned to love again.

Stacey's shock about me not sharing that little tidbit of information plays back through my head. She might be right. Maybe it's time to let the final brick crumble.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

SIX

HARKIN

Whisper (Slowed) - Able Heart

It's time. I need to tell her the truth I've been holding on to. I don't think we can move forward with the chaos about to rain down on us without clearing the air first. Her warm, wet body nestles into my hold as I step into the other room.

"Here, let me get you some clothes," I offer as I try to place her on her side of the bed. She doesn't let go, clinging to pull me down with her. The towel drops open, exposing her beautiful body.

"I don't need clothes. Come to bed," she whispers into my ear.

What my little one wants, she gets. There's no denying her in times like this, with the vulnerability written all over her face.

"Sweetness, we're not alone in this house," I remind her as I follow her body down onto the soft mattress. Her thighs spread, opening with enough space for me to lay between them. It feels wrong to be this close to her and still have a barrier of fabric between us.

"I can be quiet. Plus, I'm pretty sure Stacey had enough wine to knock out an elephant."

“But James is still very much awake,” I point out. “And we need his help. So, you better not let him hear you come all over my tongue.”

Her giggles fill the quiet room as I push down her body, capturing a pink pert nipple in my mouth with a gentle tug. Those giggles quickly turn deeper into soft moans of pleasure the moment my tongue flicks against her clit.

“Are you going to stay quiet for me?”

She nods in agreement, but when my head lifts from between her thighs and my eyes cast up at her, she remembers. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl. Now fuck my face, baby.”

Diving back down, I lick her slit from her puckered hole to clit, then pause and wait for her to take the reins. She doesn't hesitate, rotating her hips back and forth, chasing her high. Her breathing turns erratic, and I slip my hands around her thighs, pulling her down against my tongue even harder. Rough fingers dig into my hair, pulling from the scalp.

“Fuck, Harkin, don't stop. Right there. I'm so close,” she begs loudly, and I pinch her inner thigh in warning.

Her whimpers set me off. One orgasm is never enough between us. Her fingers, which were digging into my scalp, push against my shoulders as she tries to break away from me. Overstimulation turns her moans into laughter as I refuse to let her move away from my tongue.

“Stop squirming,” I order, slapping the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh. “I need more, and you'll give it to me.”

“Harkin, please, I can’t. I need you inside me.”

“And I need a stronger taste of your cum on my tongue, little one. Now, stop whining and do as you’re told.”

She doesn’t stop fighting me, though, and now I know it’s not just the overstimulation driving her. It’s her incessant bratty behavior and inability to give up complete control. When she inevitably realizes she won’t win against me and gives up, it makes the fight all the sweeter.

She may be strong, but with my arms wrapped in a death grip around her thighs and my face buried in her pussy, she’s not going anywhere until her juices are dripping off my tongue and her tight cunt’s ready for the taking.

“Fuck. Harkin. Stop, please.” She draws in a deep breath before whispering the sweetest pleas.

I growl against her entrance, spearing my tongue into her. Her begging has my cock throbbing against the zipper of my jeans, desperate for reprieve against its confines. But she’s close again, and I can feel it buzzing between us, like a sixth sense I’ve developed from exploring every inch of her during our disappearance into the mountains.

Another flick against her clit shatters her entirely against the mattress. It’s the most exquisite sight to behold. One that I’ll never tire of creating. As she steadies her breath and her chest settles, I sit back and unzip my jeans, shucking them to the floor. I almost sigh with relief when my cock pops free, bobbing against my lower stomach. It jerks, ready to slide through her glistening heat.

Drawing my fingers lazily up the smooth underside of her leg, I slide forward and hover above until her eyes are lined with mine. They’re glassy and hooded as she

comes down from her release. If I left her alone, she'd be tucked on her side and snoring in mere minutes. But my cock throbs, and I slide my hips against her pussy, pulling the sweetest little whimpers from her throat when the tip hits her clit.

“Are you with me?”

She doesn't answer with her words. Instead, her hips shift that tight cunt teasingly against me.

“Fuck,” I draw out as she keeps her slow, sleepy pace. “You could make me come this way. But your pussy is calling my name, and I think my cock needs warming tonight.”

I wait for her to retreat and follow, pushing inch by inch inside my favorite place. I could stop here and die happily. But she contracts around me, pulsing her walls against my aching cock. Any blood left in my body drains, heading south to my dick, and it swells, pulling a satisfied moan from my girl.

She's fighting the line of drowsy consciousness, ready for slumber but desperate to black out from bliss. I plan to give her just that. I keep my pace, slowly pulling out to the tip before wrapping an arm under her knee and shifting her leg up to hit a deeper angle. When I slide back in and bottom out, I feel the tell-tale signs of my orgasm on the horizon.

Keira's eyes are closed, her fingers gripped in the soft sheets. Molding our bodies together, I capture her lips and demand entry. She doesn't fight me, giving in immediately to tango our tongues. I use the distraction and slide my free hand under her to reach her unfilled hole.

The two orgasms I greedily stole from her left her wetness dripping onto the mattress. Her cum gives me just enough lube to push past the tight ring of muscle. My hips

never lose rhythm, and my body glides against her sensitive clit. As my finger pushes deeper inside her ass, she spasms around my cock, milking my cum with every squeezing pulse.

Growling into her mouth, I let the pleasure roll through me. Instinctually, I shove my hips down against her as the life drains out of me. I know nothing will come of it. Her birth control is firmly in place at her demand. But there's an itch somewhere in the back of my mind that likes the idea of her growing swollen with our child. I shake the thought from my mind. We're nowhere near that possibility yet. Our lives are a fucked-up puzzle of pieces that refuse to fit back together, no matter how much we work to shape them.

Yet, I don't move. My weight keeps her in place under me. Her hot body intertwined perfectly with mine. Instead of pulling out, I drop her leg and free my arm from underneath. Rolling to her side, I drag her with me, my half-hard cock still seated inside her warmth.

She doesn't move to free herself, instead snuggling closer and shoving her hips against me to deepen the connection we still hold. She sighs with contentment and grows heavier with every breath, quickly falling asleep in my arms. I'm desperate to follow in her wake, but my mind refuses to calm. The news of my father's supposed kidnapping and company problems, my mother's deteriorating mental health at his loss, Keira's father popping his head back up in the city without a care in the world, not to mention the fucking test results that need to be discussed. I tick them off one by one, rearranging their importance.

If we were back in the city, home in my apartment, I could head for the living room and pour a nightcap, but here in the rental, there's nothing. We'll need to fix that tomorrow. It's a simple task I can cross off my list before getting to the heavy stuff.

I watch the peaceful beauty in my arm. I know the most pressing issue between us is

the unopened test results. I need to grow a pair and rip off the Band-Aid. Enough is enough. We can't head into the mayhem of our families with it hanging over our heads.

Tomorrow. First thing. I'll finally learn if I have a daughter with the one person who could potentially rip my reason for breathing away from me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

SEVEN

KEIRA

Daisy - Ashnikko

I wake up in another new place, an occurrence I've gotten used to over the last week. It's like falling back into an old routine after living as a nomad for so many years when I was younger. The house is quiet, but I've been left alone. I'd know if Harkin was still in bed with me. His warmth always envelops me to the point of overheating.

The sticky soreness between my thighs brings dreamy memories of last night back to the forefront of my thoughts. I needed the release, and he knew. He always knows, reading me like a lit-up billboard sign. My eyes catch the time from the alarm clock on the nightstand. I've gotten so used to not carrying around a phone from being at the cabin that I don't even remember where it is now. The only time I need it is when Harkin and I are separated, and that's a rarity these days.

Cinder's ears perk at my rousing, and she jumps off the foot of the bed, pacing back and forth on my side.

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up."

Her tail swishes back and forth, almost knocking a glass of water onto the floor.

I find my suitcase unpacked and an outfit laid out on the dresser for me. Some women might find it controlling, especially since it's one of my regular workout sets,

but it's one less thing for me to worry about. With everything going on, I'll happily take the assist.

Now dressed and with Cinder whining at the door, we head downstairs and find a very disheveled Stace nursing a cup of coffee. The sound of Cinder's paws against the hardwoods draws Stace's eyes from her phone.

"I didn't think you could still get wasted off a couple bottles of wine," I tease her, opening the back door to let Cinder out and then grabbing my own mug of coffee before joining her at the island.

She slides the creamer my way. Harkin must have had groceries delivered early this morning, and I send my silent thanks that I won't have to endure the bitterness of black coffee.

"Let's just say, it's been a dry few months while you were away—in multiple areas."

I spit the coffee back into my mug and swing in her direction. "Bullshit."

Her eyes tell me there's absolutely no bullshit in her statement.

"Girl, how? What about that guy from the club? You two were all hot when we left?"

She doesn't answer me, hiding behind the curtain of blonde locks flowing loose. Something's up with her. She hasn't been going out. She isn't drinking. My thoughts are cut off by Harkin and James coming in from the backyard, Cinder panting loudly, hot on their heels.

"You're finally up," Harkin states, coming over to me shirtless and dripping with his black ink glistening. He quickly kisses my head before going for the fridge, pulling out two waters and slinging one to James across the island.

I follow the water and take in James's scowling face. His eyes are locked on my best friend in all her hot mess glory. The death glare she throws his way, as if daring him to say a word, screams volumes. She's in for a rough morning in more ways than one.

"You worked out without me." I fake pout toward Harkin, drawing everyone's attention to me.

"You were sleeping like the dead, and I've been up for a while. Cinder wouldn't leave your side, so she still needs a run."

I look at the pup slumbering at my feet. She's never out of my sight unless I put her away. The best guard dog, through and through.

"Stacey can go with you," James adds to the conversation.

I look at my best friend, holding in the laugh bubbling up in my chest. "Stacey, running—right." But neither of them seems to find that thought as ridiculous as I do.

Stace puts her mug down and pushes away from the island counter. "Give me fifteen to get ready, and we can go."

If I had my suspicions before, she just verified them. When she leaves the room, James follows close behind, and I wait until they disappear up the stairs before swinging my gaze toward Harkin.

"So, that happened while we were away, huh?"

"Looks like it," he says with a knowing smile.

I pop off the stool and place my mug in the sink before going over to where he's

leaning against the fridge. "Are you really going to let us go for a run on our own?" I ask, pushing into him, even with all the sweat drying against his skin.

"I have something for you before you go. Come here."

Reaching for my hand, he pulls me to the office at the back of the house. I follow behind, excited to see what's in store. He drops my hand, stepping behind the desk to open a drawer. What he drops on the desk top resembles something straight from a sci-fi film. I eye it suspiciously, taking in the shiny metal of a long ass needle attached to the front, and inch closer to the open door.

"Now listen, this is for your own good," he placates, watching me with unease growing in his eyes.

"The fuck are you up to, Harkin?"

"I won't lose you again. This guarantees that." He holds up the instrument, and how he does clues me into its use.

"You want to tag me like a fucking animal."

His lips tick to the side, pulling up into a grin he rightfully tries to hide, but he's not fast enough.

"I get it. The phone's a liability. But you couldn't be normal and get me a necklace tracker?" I pause, but don't give him enough time to weigh in. "No, not you. That'd be basic." I pace back and forth in the office.

This is insane, psychotic, really. Who does this?

Men who've already had to save your ass once from being kidnapped and then

stopped it from happening a second time.

My stupid logical brain points out.

I halt on my back-and-forth pathway, turning to stare him down. "What about you?"

He doesn't miss a beat, lifting his left arm. Against the inside of his bicep, camouflaged by dark ink, the slight bulge of a tracker sits under his skin.

"I wouldn't ask you to do something I wasn't willing to do. You want to know where I am, it pings directly to your phone, sweetness. But before we handle this, there's something more important to discuss." He draws in a deep breath, and the beautiful artwork on his chest expands.

"The test results."

He nods and pulls out his phone. "I haven't opened them yet."

"I figured as much." I push away the tracker bullshit for now and move around the desk, dropping against it in front of him.

"How long have you known?" he asks, eyes unfocused across the room.

"Long enough to deduce you weren't ready to hear the results—either way." I let that settle between us.

He shifts, eyes settling on me while his fingers grip my chin, ensuring he doesn't lose my attention. "This doesn't change anything. You hear me. You're mine, little one. I'll never let you go."

Emotion coils in my throat, clogging my agreement, but I still manage a small nod.

He deflates from the small motion and hands me the phone with the lit screen. His grip moves from my face to my waist as he waits for the life-changing news.

I've been waiting for this information for months. I'm a rip the wax strip off on two and let the pain barrel in so you can shove it down and away instead of waiting anxiously in anticipation kind of person. My eyes scan down the markers with random numbers, looking for the important bit. They stop, and my whole body tenses at what I see: the alleged father is excluded as the biological father of the tested child. And then everything inside me crumbles, and the phone slips from my fingers, thudding to the floor. Harkin is on me in a second, gathering me into his arms. Wetness skims my cheeks as I breathe in his scent, tucked into his neck.

"Fuck baby, I'm so sorry," he whispers to me as if I need consoling.

The silent sobs of relief turn to giggles, and he shoves me away at arm's length. "I—I won," I whisper, shocked something in life didn't try to take me out at the last minute—his confusion broadcasts. I clarify and expand, saying, "She doesn't get you. Not even a sliver."

"It's negative?" He stares me down.

"Yeah. Why were you worried?" I tease. The elation of finally having that dark cloud banished from over our heads washes over me.

His eyes tighten, and the firm grip my wet dreams are laced with curls around my throat before my smart mouth can run away with me. He uses the leverage to push me back until I'm lying flat against the desk and my head hangs off the other side.

His open mouth trails down my throat and across my chest. The sharp bite of pain from his teeth sinking into the top of my bulging breast makes my pussy pulse, distracting me.

Because in two point five seconds, his fingers intertwine with mine, stretching my arm out on the desk, and a piercing sting radiates from the sensitive flesh of my inner arm.

"Fuck!" I scream and twist under his weight, trying to break free.

"Two problems solved." He winks and drops a quick kiss on my forehead.

The office door flies open, James poised with his gun at the ready and my best friend at his back. He takes us in and holsters his weapon, assessing that there's no danger, but he'd be wrong.

Popping off the desk, I swing on Harkin. I don't put all my weight into it without wraps, but the right jab catches him off guard. I take a play from his book and grab his chin, lowering my voice. "If you ever do some shit like that again, I'll cut the thing from my body and drop it in the ocean. Have fun finding me then."

I turn on my heels and move past James as he watches the exchange in his usual stoic manner. Wrapping my fingers around Stacey's wrist, I pull her behind me, calling Cinder to follow as we finally leave for our stupid fucking run.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

EIGHT

HARKIN

Run for Your Life - The Seige

The video call disconnects, and the screen goes black. My chest expands as the deep sigh I've been holding for the last twenty minutes finally lets loose. The chair rocks when my weight slumps backward in defeat. Gone was the bubbly Martha Stewart homemaker my mother had always been. In her place, a disheveled shell of the woman I was expecting. She could barely string a coherent sentence together; an obvious mix of drugs and alcohol coursing through her veins, if the multiple open bottles of both on the kitchen counter were any indication.

I needed to go back to California. See her face to face and clear the house of substances. Shit, maybe even forcefully admit her to an inpatient facility. The memories of that time in my life are hazy at best, but therapy helped. Getting out of the environment that allowed me to drown in my pain was the only way out that left me alive on the other end.

The call was supposed to give me more answers and shed light on the situation with my father. Instead, it'd thrown a wrench in what little James and I had been able to piece together. We've only just arrived back in New York, so the last thing I want to do is leave Keira and go to the one place I'd rather ignore existed at all.

Fuck, telling Keira isn't going to go over well. When I break it to my girl that I'm leaving her behind, I wouldn't be surprised if she does more than swing on me this

time. But how could I show up with Keira when my mother is already fragile. She'd croak on sight, seeing the ghost of girlfriends past walking into her home. Not to mention, I don't know who has eyes on her place. If shit happens to me, that's one thing, but I don't want her father to get the drop on us across the country.

The woman in question pushes into my office but keeps her distance. She's still pissed at me, and the cold shoulder she's offering makes me want to tie her to my desk and fuck the attitude right out of her. Funny thing, we've tried that. Time and time again. It works for the moment, but her determination to be stubborn is stronger than my desire to extinguish the flame in her. Because at the end of the day, it's ingrained in her DNA and the reason she kept me chasing after her ass.

"What's the plan here?" She finally breaks the silence stirring between us.

"It's changed. I need you to go stay with James and Stacey for a while." Her hurt registers, but she quickly hides it behind a mask I don't like on her beautiful face.

"Why's that?"

"I need to go to California to check on things. My mom's worse than I expected, and I need to get to the bottom of this shit with my dad."

"You want to go without me?" she asks with raised eyebrows, questioning my judgement on the decision.

"I am going without you. It'll be safer this way."

"Oh, cut the shit. We both know this has very little to do with my safety and everything to do with the fact that mommy dearest can't handle seeing me. Yeah, you know what? You go and figure your family mess. I'll work on mine," she spits, turning on her heels and slamming the door behind her.

My fist collides with the solid wood desk, pain ricocheting, up my forearm, but it feels good and centers me. I've waited and let her be, but the spark's eaten through my fuse and it's gone. I jolt out of the desk chair sending it crashing against the wall behind me. My footsteps crash against the wooden floors as I rush to catch up to her.

"Keira!" I bellow through the quiet house. Cinder perks up from the couch where she's napping, but a quick command has her settling back in place.

The house doesn't provide many places to escape, and Keira might be pissed but she's not stupid, which tells me she won't leave the house. I take the stairs two at a time and come face to face with a very furious Keira. Her small frame seems anything but as her dark aura takes up the landing.

"What?" she barks, arms crossed against her distracting chest as it heaves. Her hip pops to the side, accentuating her luscious curves.

"We're not leaving it like that." I take the final two stairs and crowd her space. She doesn't pull back, an indestructible wall, or so she'd like me to think.

"I'm not doing this to hurt you," I coax softly, pushing a wild hair behind her ear. "She's in rough shape. What the real story is with my dad, it's crushed her, sweetness. I need to go, find out if this has anything to do with your dad, and get her taken care of. I'll be gone a couple days. Fuck, after months stuck together, just you and me, maybe you'll enjoy the break."

Her eyes soften, but she's still stiff under my hand. "Is that what you want? A break?"

"Baby, I'd whisk you away to a deserted island and chain your ass to me permanently if I thought you'd let me get away with it."

A small bubble of laughter breaks free from her, but she stifles it quickly, trying to remain unaffected in the moment. "I'm not happy about this."

"Noted. Think of it this way, with me there working on that end of things and you here with James working on figuring out what the hell your dad wants, we're closer to putting all of this behind us."

"Don't logic me right now," she teases, finally relaxing into my hold. "When are you leaving?"

"I need to touch base with James, but as soon as possible. And hey, promise me you won't do anything crazy while I'm gone. Don't run off and find danger, okay?"

"It's more like it finds me and I have no say in the matter."

"You know that chain I mentioned earlier? Don't make me use it now just to keep you safe."

"Yes, Sir," she says with a saucy smile.

The house of my childhood looms over me, my fingers dangling in the air in front of the doorbell. I'm hesitant to sound the alarm of my arrival. I could let myself in with my keys, but it feels wrong now that I don't live here.

This is why I'm here. The sooner I get it started, the faster I can leave and get back to Keira. James wasn't too happy with my decision to leave Keira behind, trying to point out that shit always seems to hit the fan when we're parted. He's not wrong, but I trust him to keep it together while I'm away.

Drawing in a deep breath, I shove my finger against the bell. The buzzing sounds throughout the house, loud enough that I can hear it on the stoop.

“Com”—the thud of something hitting the floor stalls her arrival—“ing.” She pulls the door open, leaving the smallest crack for her to peer through.

Surprise filters through the one eye I can see and her eyebrow skyrockets. “Harkin?” she whispers.

“Hey, Mom. You going to let me in, or?” I let the question hang between us before she pulls the door open the rest of the way to usher me in.

The moment the door latches shut, she whirls me around and her delicate frame wraps around me. “Oh, my sweet boy, where have you been? The mess your father’s made.” Her sobs are quiet, but the evidence of her distress is in the trail of tears streaming down her face.

I’ve never seen her like this, other than the other day over video chat. It’s just as off-putting in person as it was over a screen, if not more. Her strength dwindles, and I all but carry her into the sitting room.

“Can I get you something?”

I don’t know what she thinks she can do for me when she can barely sit up on her own. Her body’s slumped to the side, eyes half-mast and red. I’m hoping it’s from lack of sleep or crying, but from the stench wafting off her, that’s only making it worse.

“We need to talk. What the hell is going on? Where’s Dad?”

She flinches at my tone, but I’m too irritated to draw it in. I didn’t want to take this trip. I’m pissed there’s yet another piece of this damn puzzle I have to figure out. It’d be great if there was no relation between our stack of problems with Domenico and my dad’s disappearance, but the possibility is miniscule.

“I don’t know where your father is.” She sniffles and wipes at her eyes. “He’s gone, Harkin.”

“Gone, gone? Or missing? I need to know what I’m dealing with here.”

She ignores my question completely, getting up haphazardly from the place I dropped her on the couch before stumbling out of the room. I should probably go after her, make sure she didn’t run off to hide from me. I’ll give her a couple minutes before this becomes an unwarranted game of hide and seek.

When she returns, a small parcel is clutched between her shaking hands. I leave my phone forgotten on the arm of the couch and reach for it. The thin cardboard is cold to the touch. The box looks like something I’d get takeout in back in New York. Dread settles in my stomach when I notice the faded stain along the bottom.

“Where did this come from?” I ask, peeling the folding top back to reveal the contents. “Jesus fuck, Mom. You could have given me a little warning.” My shock radiates through the room, but it doesn’t faze her in the least.

“Mom. I need you to snap out of whatever the fuck little bullshit trance you’ve got going on and answer my fucking questions so I can figure this shit out. Where did this come from and when?”

“It was left at the front gate a couple of weeks ago. The gardener brought it up to the house.”

“And you’ve what? Just been keeping some fingers on ice in the freezer? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did,” she shouts, jumping to her feet a little too quickly, since she sways to the left and almost takes another tumble to the floor. She has the sense to sit back down

before continuing. “I did call. Your phone was shut off. So, I called James, and he said he’d get in touch with you. How was I supposed to know you wouldn’t get my message?”

“I’m assuming since they’re still here, you didn’t involve the police.”

“No! No, police, Harkin. They’ll kill him.”

“If he’s not already dead,” I whisper under my breath. “Has anyone called, emailed, shit sent a fucking carrier with a note? There’s got to be more than a box of fingers we can work with here.”

“In your father’s office, on his computer, there’s a message for you.”

I nod and leave her half zoned out in the sitting room. I’ll need to get James to send over someone he trusts before I leave. It’s not safe for her on her own. She’s as much of a threat to herself as Domenico could be. Maybe she’d be better off in rehab until he returns. If he returns.

His office is closed up and dark. I’m shocked it’s unlocked since he never left it that way when I was living here. Maybe she knows more about my father’s dealings than she let on. Or maybe I was the only one he was worried about stumbling in here and digging through his shady shit.

For someone who locked his room up tight, his computer is a different story. His password doesn’t even require my computer skills to break. I’m shocked to see the man who’s never shown me a modicum of emotional connection, chose my birthdate to keep people out. Then again, maybe that’s exactly why he chose it.

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got.”

Mom must have been searching for something when the email came in, because the moment I click on the browser, the email is still up. The video is paused only seconds in. It doesn't matter; I can tell from the freeze frame what to expect. I click back to the beginning and press play.

The video is pixelated, to the point I wonder if it was shot on an old flip phone. When the view changes, everything clears, and I sit forward to take it in. A man sits slumped in a metal chair that looks bolted to the cement floor. His feet are zip tied around the front legs and his hands are tied at the wrist, pulled above him and attached to a meat hook. The burlap sack over his head doesn't conceal his identity. It's pretty damn obvious the man being held and tortured is my father.

Another man rounds the camera and walks toward him, before ripping off the hood. Blood coats a third of his face, running from cuts and broken body parts. The swell of his eyes has them closed to a point, I'm not sure if he can even see. His complexion is no longer tan from the California sun, but black and blue from the deep bruising. Yet, with all that he's suffered through, he's still conscious, groaning and mumbling something unintelligible.

"Well, would you look at that! He's finally awake," someone says somewhere beyond the camera's reach, as the man now standing behind my father chuckles.

I push the volume as loud as it'll go. Once I get the file onto my computer, I can dissect every inch for clues and see if their microphone picked up more than they bargained for.

The problem with their setup, the man on camera isn't hiding his identity. That means one of two things. My father's dead or will be soon, or Domenico's grasping at straws, looking for a pressure point to draw us out hiding. His biggest mistake is thinking my father offers adequate leverage for me to put Keira back into his orbit. That shit won't happen until we can pinpoint what his plan is for her.

He spent years keeping tabs on her without her knowledge. All that time she spent on the streets, couch hopping, and working dead-end jobs just to afford a shitty apartment. And yet he did nothing but sit back in his little fortress, ruling his criminal empire. It was only when she disappeared from under his nose and his other daughter ran out of options that he came knocking.

There's more to it than just Keira's niece being sick—if that were the case, there'd be no need for all the theatrics. The real issue is something Keira won't agree to. Over time, he's learned enough about her and how she thinks, having watched from the shadows, to know that he'll have to force it on her.

My fear... that key is me.

I pull my wandering thoughts back to the video when the man speaks again. “Mr. Greyson, it seems some of our contracts aren't being fulfilled to the specifications you and our boss agreed on. Mr. Morelli isn't feelin' too confident in your services any longer.”

Well, that answers that.

“Lo”—a wet, hacking cough cuts my father's rebuttal in half—“okay, I didn't tell him anything. I haven't spoken to Harkin in months. I don't know where he is!”

The muted light in the room glints off a small object in the stranger's hand. He brings it up to the hook holding my father's hands above his head and slides it over a finger. Within seconds, a blood-curdling scream rips through the computer as I watch my father's finger drop on to his chest and roll off to the floor, disappearing somewhere out of frame. Blood streams down his arm from what's left of the nub on his finger. His screams turn into groans of pain as he fights to maintain consciousness.

“Let's me rephrase my question. Maybe that'll help jog your memory. I mean, I could

do this all night. We still have nineteen more tries,” he says with the most nonchalance I’ve ever heard come out of a person. “Where’s Domenico’s daughter and that boy of yours?”

The man looks down and notices my father’s head lolling forward. I doubt he even heard his question. My father’s a businessman. I’m sure he got into his fair share of fist fights in his younger years, but I doubt he’s throwing punches down at the golf course. Which is his idea of a workout these days. This amount of pain is on a level my father would never fathom having to deal with outside of a freak accident. It’s no wonder he’s given in to his body’s coping mechanisms.

Mr. Snippy pulls the handkerchief from his pocket, then takes his sweet time folding it in half, just to shove it forcefully onto wound. The contact brings my father back to, his body jolting at the new stream of pain.

“And he’s back with us.”

“Please... stop. I don’t know anything.”

“You see, that’s just not something I can go back and tell my boss. I need information and you’re going to give me something one way or another, Mr. Greyson.”

The cutter comes down on the next finger and off pops another digit, joining its friend on the floor. My experience in torture is limited, but his plan seems flawed if information is the end goal. How is someone supposed to answer your incessant questions if they’re constantly passing out from the pain you’re doling. It’s like he hears my thoughts, because he reties the handkerchief around both and steps away.

My father is out cold now, his body hanging limp. I fast forward through the rest of the thirty-minute video, but the shot doesn’t change, and it eventually clicks off.

“Fuck,” I draw out, wiping my hand down my face over the trimmed stubble Keira wouldn’t let me get rid of.

Exiting from the video, I’m surprised to see the encrypted email made it into the secure system I built for his company. Then again, they’ve probably always had access to him this way. If anything, it’s protected their conversations from being leaked to his higher ups and the press.

Random coordinates 40.816951, -73.9177496 are all that’s in the email message. I pop them into the search engine in two clicks I have the location. Back to New York I go.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

NINE

KEIRA

Trouble - Valerie Broussard

Harkin left for California twenty-four hours ago, and I'm already scratching at the walls to get out of the house. It's one thing to be locked away in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, but being tucked away in suburbia makes my skin crawl. Something about the constant noise of cars speeding by, kids screaming in their backyards, and lawn equipment going at all hours of the day sets me on edge. It's far from the sounds of the city my brain is accustomed to sleep through.

Stacey and James invited me to stay with them while Harkin is away, but they're right down the street if I need them. At least, that's the excuse I gave Harkin when he demanded I stay with them until he was back. I love my best friend, but her situationship isn't something I want to butt in on.

"Cinder," I call through the house. "Let's go for a run, my sweet girl," I tell her when she pads down the hall, stopping before me.

She hates clipping into her harness and lead after months of being off-leash in the woods. Her breed likes to wander, but her recall is astounding. That doesn't matter here when the town has leash laws. She hates to be chained, and I know the feeling all too well.

The lead clicks around my waist, and I pop my headphone in, syncing it to my phone

in case Harkin calls, and open my music app. Spotify's Daylist refreshes and pops up with the title Euphoric Art Deco Early Morning. I go with it and start at a slow warm-up pace.

The quaint houses pass by as we make our way toward the center of the small town about two and a half miles away. There's a dog-friendly coffee shop I pinpointed during our first couple of days here. Harkin didn't seem to think there'd be an issue with us going out, but he reminded me to keep my name to myself and our reason for being here ambiguous.

I slow our speed as we approach the shop and wipe the sweat from my face with my sweatshirt before peeling it over my head and tying it around my waist. Instead of a drive-thru, which doesn't seem necessary in this place, they have an outside walk-up window surrounded by outdoor furniture to enjoy your coffee.

"Hi, what can I get for you?" the barista asks, too cheerful for seven a.m. in my opinion.

"Iced vanilla Americano with a splash of cream. Thanks." I pay and usher Cinder over to the dog water fountain.

"She's beautiful." A voice startles me from my crouched position. I stand, gripping my cell and patting my thigh where I know my knife is tucked safely away.

"Yeah, she is. Thanks," I reply and shift, putting Cinder between me and the man trying to make small talk.

"So, are you new to the area? I don't think I've seen you around here, and I'm here daily for this." He holds a pale green drink you couldn't pay me to try.

"Yeah, we're just getting settled. Haven't had much time to explore yet," I share,

hoping he'll take the hint that it isn't just me.

He doesn't look threatening. He has no tattoos or gun bulges, which I would definitely be able to see in the tight athletic wear he's sporting. Your typical suburban middle-aged man, who probably has a wife and a couple of kids at home but is ready to hit on anyone who catches his attention.

"Hadley," the barista calls, giving me an out.

I excuse myself and walk to the window, grab my coffee, and head for the exit path. He doesn't seem to take that as an end to our conversation.

"Hadley, is it?" He looks me up and down, blatantly checking me out, and I don't hide the disgusted look from taking over my face.

I glance at his left hand, and right there for everyone to see is the wedding ring I expected. He steps in my path, and Cinder growls, standing between us. I don't chastise her behavior; she can read the situation.

His self-preservation kicks in as he steps back. "I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Keith. If you're ever looking for a running partner, I'm over on Sitka Drive." He holds his hand out, but I let it hang in the air between us.

Maybe I'm used to the city where people mind their own fucking business and let you move along your day without interrupting it, but apparently that isn't the mindset here. I know we need to blend in, but a city girl can only fake it so much.

"Thanks, but I usually run with my partner. He's just busy this morning." I make to move past him again, and this time, he lets me.

"See you around, Hadley," he calls after me, and I send a prayer to the universe to not

let that happen.

Cinder and I walk back toward the house, but I decide to take a detour to the place James and Stacey are renting. Logically, I know the coffee shop incident is nothing more than an overly friendly and flirtatious neighbor, but I'm not trying to lead Keith back to our place, just in case.

Knocking on their front door, I sip the last bit of iced coffee from my cup and wait for an answer. James pulls back the door and looks at me, surprised.

"What are you doing? You didn't tell me you were on your way over. And where did you get that? Did you go out?"

"Woah, there, buddy. One question at a time." I laugh and walk into their place. "Where's Stace?"

He joins me in the kitchen and gives me an incredulous look, telling me all I need to know about my bestie's whereabouts. That girl's still tucked in bed, snoring, no doubt.

"Why didn't you text you were coming over? I would have come picked you up."

"I was bored and wanted to get out of the house. A coffee sounded good, so I stopped there first. But—" I let my sentence drop off, more so to annoy him than anything else. James seems to have the patience of a saint, but that doesn't mean I don't find joy in trying to push him over the edge whenever I have the chance.

"But, what?"

"I think we might need to look into someone here in town. It's probably nothing, but to be safe, you know?" I shrug and go to their fridge, looking for a bottle of water.

“Help yourself,” he says with fake annoyance as I pull it out with a cup of yogurt. “So, who is this person you think we need to check out? What happened while you were out?”

“His name’s Keith. He lives on Sitka Drive. I’m pretty sure he’s just your typical piece of shit husband. Oh, and we should probably not tell Harkin he was hitting on me.”

“I’m not telling him shit about that. The last thing we need while we’re laying low here is a murderous Harkin on the loose because you couldn’t stay out of the public eye for a few days.”

“It’s fine, James. He wouldn’t—No, you’re right.” I let out a little laugh. “So, you think you can find this guy?”

“You wound me. Shit, with everything Harkin told me he taught you, I’m surprised you can’t do it yourself.”

“I could. But I figured someone else should know in case I go missing again.”

“Jesus, help me,” he pleads and pops open his computer on the counter.

“I don’t think we have any sway with him,” I joke, trying to pull a smile from him. It doesn’t work. He ignores me while tapping away at the keys.

“Keith Sullivan, forty-two, married with three kids. He’s a broker for a firm in the city, but works at a local office here in town. No prior arrests. A couple of speeding tickets. Nothing that seems important to our situation.”

“I figured. Thanks.”

“No problem. Have you heard from Harkin this morning?” he asks.

“Yeah. He’s getting stuff settled with his mom. He wanted to check her into an inpatient center, but she isn’t making things easy. He might have to hire help for the house and extra security for her so she feels safer. He told me he found something but didn’t want to share it over the phone. Did he tell you what it was?”

“He’s got a lead. But shit isn’t looking good for his father. Your father’s men took him; it might not be as easy as we hoped to get him back. Though I’m not sure if that’s Harkin’s MO anymore.”

“Did he tell you what the lead is? Maybe we can start getting shit together here for when he gets back.”

“You should probably talk with him first.”

These two piss me off with all their little boys club secrets. James is beyond loyal to Harkin. Which was great, unless I’m trying to get information from him, and he’s sealed up like Fort Knox. I don’t want to wait for Harkin to get back in a few days to plan our next move. Maybe there’s something I know that could help with whatever it is he’s learned in California.

Harkin isn’t the only one with connections that can be useful to us. It’ll mean going back into the city, and I’m sure that’ll go over about as well as an erection in a nunnery. But if they don’t know, how much trouble could it be?

TEN

KEIRA

Scream My Name - Thomas LaRosa

James insists on driving Cinder and me back to the rental. He takes a short detour to pass by Keith's house, probably making us seem suspicious as he slows to a crawl, looking for something that isn't there. The rest of the day ticks by slower than sand falling through an hourglass. My mind fixates on Harkin knowing something I don't, and whatever that information is that he's not sharing it with me, only James. We'll discuss his choices when he gets back and establish an understanding of who comes first in all aspects of our relationship.

Plating the final addition to my dinner, I take the makeshift charcuterie and my glass of wine upstairs to crawl into bed. I need to plan my trip into the city, and I'm banking on the fact that Harkin will be too busy in California to keep an eye on the tracking device in my arm. We'd agreed the trackers were for emergencies and discussed deleting the app on our phones and leaving it up to James, but ultimately, he refused. Some bullshit excuse of not being able to get to the information right away if he needed it. Like he couldn't just check from his browser. Then again, he could always track my phone. But that's easy enough to keep off his radar when turned off. The thing does an awful lot of dying lately.

Going through the options, I start with taking the rental car. That's flawed, because if James drives by, I need him to believe I'm still tucked away and safe. There's a short window of opportunity for me to go and get back before Harkin's return tomorrow

night. An Uber for a three-hour drive would be astronomical. Not to mention, the charge would probably ping Harkin, defeating the purpose. Looks like the train is my best option. It runs every two hours, and I can leave first thing in the morning, make it by noon, and return before anyone notices I'm gone.

With my plan set, I scroll through the streaming service to find something to watch before bed. But as I'm about to click play on a new horror release, Harkin's name pops up for a video call. Answering the call, I expand the video, taking in his tired demeanor. Things must not be going well.

"Hey, sweetness. In bed already?"

"Not much to do but call it an early night when I'm alone."

"Aww, are you missing me?" He sits forward, his face illuminated more by a light nearby.

"Hmm, Cinder misses her daddy."

The dog in question lazily moves her eyes in my direction, but doesn't try to get up.

"And do you miss your daddy?"

My face contorts in the small reflective video of me in the corner. "Listen, I'll call you Sir every day of the week and twice on Sundays, but I draw the line at Daddy. That's a hard limit."

The seriousness of my declaration draws up the corners of his mouth before a contagious laugh spills from his lips, causing his body to bounce in the computer chair. "Shit, little one. I needed that."

“You’re still coming back tomorrow, right?”

“That’s the plan. I’m ready to be out of California and back on the East Coast with you. But until then, I’ve got a little present for us.”

“Oh?” I perk up, excited to see what it might be.

“Go check the bottom dresser drawer on my side. There’s a small box for you.”

I leap out of bed, almost depositing my computer on the floor. Cinder stands at the edge of the mattress, looking around for whatever caused my unexpected excitement.

“Down,” I hear Harkin demand through the computer.

She listens, hopping down and curling up in the corner by the bedroom door.

The package is small, but when it comes to Harkin, God only knows what he’s hidden inside the matte present box.

“Did you find it, little one?” he calls again, his voice deepening into that seductive tone that means we’re about to step into my favorite space.

I settle the computer back on the bed and sit with the box in my lap. “Yep!” I beam.

“Can I open it?”

“Keira.”

“Can I open it, Sir?” I correct, lowering my eyes. It doesn’t matter that he spent months training me while we were in Colorado. We worked through the dynamic we wanted to explore and develop in our relationship. He had experience, and I was still pushing the boundaries to see what I could gain. I doubted it was something we’d

ever nix altogether.

“Open it.”

He doesn't have to order that one twice. The soft silk glides through my fingers as I pull the bow free. The top lifts off from the bottom, exposing the U-shaped silicone toy. He's quiet as I work the toy from its plastic holder.

“Strip.”

There isn't much to strip since I'm already in pajamas—a rarity these days. I shove the gift box and toy aside and move the computer down, giving Harkin a wider angle. It also gives me enough space to lift the soft cotton tank over my head and slide the sleep shorts down my legs and onto the floor.

“Lie back against the headboard and spread your legs for me.”

I do as I'm told, pulling up my knees and dropping them comfortably to the sides.

“Fuck, little one. Look at my pretty pink pussy.”

I don't, because I know it's not an order but an observation. My nipples pebble from the cold room and the anticipation of our night to come. The longer it stays quiet while he takes me in, naked and on display, the more I want to fidget and get started. The sound of his zipper lowering is deafening in the moment.

“Are you wet for me, or do we need to get you ready, sweetness?”

My fingers move before he finishes his question, drawing across my skin with the lightest touch. Goosebumps bead up in their aftermath, lighting my skin up like the sky on the Fourth of July. When they reach the apex of my thighs, I can't help but

circle my clit, ripping a needy moan from my throat.

“Tsk tsk. I said check, not play with your clit.”

My fingers halt their assault as much as I want to ignore him and continue. “Sorry, Sir,” I add, hoping to keep the momentum moving. Dipping my fingers to my entrance, I pause before pushing in without any resistance. My pussy’s slick and ready for use.

“Show me.”

I drag them out slowly, the sheen of my arousal coating the digits I hold up toward the camera.

“Always so wet for me, little one. That shameless cunt of yours doesn’t even need me to be in the same room. Grab the toy and turn it on.”

I reach out quickly across the mattress until my fingers fold around the smooth material. Harkin’s chuckle meets my ears, and I whip my head around, throwing daggers in the computer’s direction.

“Don’t start. You’ll regret it,” he warns as the toy vibrates to life in my hand, causing me to drop it in my lap.

Fuck, that was intense.

“Lay back, sweetness, put it on your clit for me.”

I don’t hesitate, ready to feel the quick, euphoric orgasm from the stimulation. Before placing it where he asked, I suck the toy into my mouth, over-exaggerating its slow removal, no doubt looking like a porn star written for men’s consumption. His needy

groan confirms it had my desired effect. Teasing him is a new high for me, not one I usually explore when he's physically here. I add it to my mental checklist to try more often.

I let the toy circle my hard nipple on the left side, then the right, where it vibrates against my taut skin. The reminder has me moving it straight to my clit, but it powers off. The whimper it pulls from my throat voices my annoyance.

"Not so nice, is it?"

Touché. I think to myself, but the only thing he sees is the eye roll that accompanies it.

The toy roars to life, likely on the highest setting. I jerk it away from my body. It's too much all at once.

"Put it back right now."

His stern tone is a warning that things will get worse if I don't listen. Overthrowing my better judgment, I do, and sigh in relief when the vibration slows the moment it connects with my clit. Instead of the instant overstimulation I was bracing for, my body hums in pleasure instead.

I let the crescendo of bliss build in my bloodstream. My body writhes against the small toy, searching for more friction.

"More. Please!" But the toy doesn't accelerate. "Sir."

He waits for a beat, letting me drown in my desperate frustration. The toy stops altogether, and I shoot up from my relaxed position, eyes connecting with his mirth-filled ones on the screen.

“Remember your place, little one. I might be across the country now, but I’ll be back tomorrow. Now, be the good little slut I know you are. Lay back and listen.”

My gut reaction is to throw a vicious fuck you in his direction and slam the computer shut before taking control of my pleasure, and it wars inside my head with the small voice that knows better. The one Harkin spent months molding with every ounce of attentiveness to my needs. I hijack my instinct to fight back and draw in a deep breath, relaxing back into the mattress.

“Sweetness, are you with me?” he checks in, and I could kiss him for it if he were here.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Time to use the toy. Slide the wide end into that wet pussy for me. Make sure the top fits perfectly against your clit. No cheating this time.”

I listen, adjusting to the sensation of the ridged toy. It’s nothing compared to the girth I’m used to with his cock. If anything, it leaves me wanting more. I’m about to tell him just that when the vibrations start. It’s slow at first, but the steady hum brings my attention south. My hips rotate, searching for friction that doesn’t quite scratch my itch.

“More?”

“So much more, Sir.”

“Aww, is my girl not used to such small things shoved deep in her tight, warm cunt. Are you desperate for more, my dirty little slut?”

“Fuck, Sir. Please. It’s not enough.” The whine in my tone would be embarrassing if

it were anyone but Harkin on the other side of the screen and I wasn't frantic to finally come.

"Keep begging, and maybe I'll give you what you need."

The sound of him spitting into the mic pulls my eyes to the computer. I catch the last drip from his lips as it disappears below the edge of his desk. Desire pools at my center, knowing his hard cock is just out of sight. He catches me watching and shoves his chair back just enough to reveal the crown. His thumb glides across the tip through a glistening mixture of spit and pre-cum.

My pussy clenches against the toy, reminding me of its existence and the lack of fullness it's providing. "Sir, I need more. I'm not—Please, I'm not full enough."

As the plea falls from my lips, his hand starts pumping his hard cock. Twisting and squeezing tight, just as I'd do to bring him the pleasure he craves when I'm wrapped around him.

"Shove two fingers in your needy cunt, then. Fill it full, and I'll make you come."

I don't wait, frantic with a craving to feel the weightlessness that takes over moments before it all comes crashing down. The vibrations from the toy increase against my clit and fingers. My body bows against the mattress, and whimpers escape between my lips. Nonsensical muttering fills the empty room as I try to beg for more, but the delirium takes over.

"Come for me, little one. Drench your hand and scream my name."

His command pushes me to the edge, and my efforts send me tumbling from it into a freefall I blissfully embrace. The toy draws out the experience, and my body caves in, searching for a finish line that doesn't seem close enough. I hear his muted roar as he

joins me on the other side. My brain and body are too relaxed to enjoy the view.

Whimpering a plea for him to turn off the toy I could easily remove but don't dare touch, he takes pity on me. But only after sending one last violent shock through my system.

“You did so good for me, little one. You can remove the toy now. Make sure you wash it before you fall asleep.”

“Yes, Sir,” I reply dazedly.

“I—” he cuts himself off and restarts, “I can't wait to be back home with you. Sleep well, sweetness. I'll see you tomorrow.”

The video chat closes before I can respond, not that I could vocalize much of a response in my current state. I do as he said and clean up before I crawl back into bed. My eyes close, and I drift off as soon as my head hits the pillow.

ELEVEN

HARKIN

Divided - R3YAN, CLRBLND.

I may have made her a promise, but the validity of it only stands when she keeps up her end of the bargain. She had orders to stay put, to not leave the fucking safe house. Yet, as the wheels hit the tarmac in New York, her little dot gets closer to the city. She's lucky I'm already here. I have no clue where she's headed, but if she's not careful, she'll walk straight into the clutches of the man we've spent months trying to locate and draw out.

The stairs from the plane creek under my weight as I descend toward the pavement where James is waiting in the blacked-out SUV. I called him when my phone pinged Keira's location outside the twenty-mile radius I set for her. My little runner is back to her old ways, but this time, she's easier prey.

"Any ideas yet?" he asks.

Slipping into the passenger seat, I throw my bag over my shoulder into the back seat. It lands with a thud and a small squeak. My eyes lift in the noise's direction and land square on Stacey's expectant one.

"Why is she here, James?"

"I keep a shorter leash on my toy. You could take a pointer or two from my book.

Maybe we'd stop being in this position."

His wicked gleam doesn't leave the review mirror. I spin back to face forward and hear her harrumph as we speed off from the airport. That snide comment won't earn him any favors later. However, something tells me Stacey's slightly more malleable than my girl.

"She's almost at the train station. You might as well get me close, and we can see if she takes a car or walks. I have no clue where she's headed." An idea pops into my head.

"Stacey," I draw out her name, flipping the visor down and sliding the mirror panel open. "Text your slippery bestie and see what she's up to, would you?"

I stare her down, curious to see if I have any sway with the woman or if her loyalty is strong enough to turn me down. When she pulls out her cell and starts tapping away, I know I was right about my earlier assumption, and I'm slightly disappointed she didn't tell me to fuck off, for Keira's sake. Then again, she's been made aware of the situation. She knows the stakes of Keira deciding to go off on her own.

"She's not answering my text."

"Call her," I snap, my anxiety taking the drivers seat before I notice James strangling my steering wheel out of the corner of my eye.

We've created quite the dynamic between the four of us. But he has more restraint than I do because, had he taken that tone with Keira, it wouldn't have been the steering wheel my hands were wrapped around.

I keep the app on my phone pulled up as we near the train station. Keira's here somewhere, but if I jump out now, I could end up heading in the opposite direction.

When the dot starts down the street at a slow enough pace, I know she's on foot.

"Any idea what's around here?" I throw out, hoping either of them might know what she's up to. I should know, with all the background I pulled on her months ago, but I'm in the dark this time.

"You know how much shit's around here. It could literally be anything!" Stacey says, exasperated at my question.

"Pull over," I growl, annoyed by her high-pitched tone. He swerves the SUV through two lanes of traffic and double parks as I quickly slide from the passenger seat. "Stay close. I'll text you," I instruct before slamming the door.

The sidewalk is busy, with all sorts of people leaving the station. I don't have eyes on Keira, but it's unnecessary when the tracker keeps us within blocks of each other as I close the distance. After the fourth or fifth crosswalk, we're finally close enough that I can see her short frame up ahead.

She's smart, dressed casually in an oversized sweatshirt and beanie pulled tight over her dark, flowing hair. Nothing special to draw attention, she blends in seamlessly. We only make it about another twenty feet before she slows to a halt in front of an undistinguishable building, and I slide into a walk-up alcove. It throws me back to the night I followed her home from The Red Door. It hasn't even been a year, yet it feels like a lifetime ago with everything that's happened since.

The buzzing barely registers over the hustling crowd between us, drawing me quickly from my hiding spot to close my fingers around the door just in time. She doesn't turn around when the door doesn't latch, but I wait to see where she moves before following. If she turns around, there's no escaping her or the wrath that will follow.

Three flights and two halls later, she knocks on an apartment door. I wait patiently

around the corner, using the reflective dome on the ceiling to watch her next move. I don't expect the distorted frame to step out, wrap their arms around my girl, and plant their lips on hers.

"Baby girl, it's been forever. Where have you been?" the voice of the next person I'm about to murder in broad daylight says.

The gun appears in my hand before I know it, and my body stalks around the corner. I'm no longer worried about her wrath, so I don't creep; in fact, my footfalls must be loud as I charge in their direction because both turn toward me.

"Keira," I grit out, and she jumps further from the person who spurred this adventurous outing.

We're at a standstill, my body shaking with a crazed fury I haven't felt since the men came after Keira at the cabin. Then it was shoot first, ask questions never, because it wasn't important, but right now, I'm hanging on by a thread of sanity.

"Well, isn't this interesting," the interloper spouts while leaning against the door frame, looking unfazed and curious.

Keira approaches me, trying to block the death glare flying over her shoulder. Her slender fingers wrap around my wrist, and their cool touch breaks my focus, drawing my eyes down to hers. Though her full lips are pursed, I can't quite read the expression on her face.

"I should have known better," she whispers while rolling her eyes. "Put the gun away, Harkin. It's not what you think."

"Sweetness, if it were, she'd be dead."

A laugh breaks out behind us, and I stiffen in Keira's grasp.

"Oh shit, baby girl, you switched teams and went full caveman, huh."

The hand that was moving to holster my gun slows, but Keira sees the hesitation in my choice.

"Nik, could you fucking not," Keira throws over her shoulder. Her hand shoves mine to continue, and the gun finally gets tucked away.

Nik—apparently—shakes her head and pushes off the door. "We should probably take this inside, lovebirds. My neighbors are nosey as fuck, and I have a feeling neither of you wants a visit from the local PD."

"You're in so much fucking trouble, sweetness," I whisper in her ear as we follow into the apartment. Her breathy whimper is muffled by the door slamming behind us, but the flush that blooms across her cheeks is plain as day for everyone to see.

The apartment is a small studio with one door that must lead to a cramped bathroom. There's a twin bed in the corner, a kitchen opposite. In the middle of the room, a couple of floor cushions and bean bags offer the only place to sit other than the one thing that doesn't fit the space's design. A computer set up to rival mine back at the apartment. The quad monitor monstrosity takes up half the studio.

Our host graciously throws out her arm while dropping into the computer chair and spinning back our way. My fingers dig into Keira's hip from behind. She wiggles free and plops down, squishing one of the beanbags under her weight. She's too comfortable here for Nik to be an acquaintance. They obviously have a history based on how she welcomed my girl.

Fucking great.

I stand behind Keira, arms tight across my chest, and stare down the stranger. She's blatantly examining me from head to toe, probably thinking precisely what everyone else who sees me on the street does.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you, beautiful."

A thunderous growl pulls from my chest, and Keira sighs below me. "Nikita, cut the shit. We haven't been together in years. Stop stirring the pot."

"Come on, babe. I'm just testing your new man. I know you. He's got to have a grip on his patience to deal with the shit you pull." She drops a knowing look at Keira.

"I'm not that bad." My sassy girl pouts and it's enough to pull a chuckle out of both of us.

"Fuck both of you."

"Oh, you've already done that," Nikita pops back.

"Enough. Why are we here, sweetness?"

Her head tips back, giving me her eyes. "I wanted to help."

"Fucking hell, Keira. Seriously? Do you know what being in the city by yourself could lead to?"

"I wasn't alone, though, was I?"

"That's not the point, and you damn well know it."

"As entertaining as this is, I have a job to get back to. So, if you need my help with

something, baby girl, now's your chance."

"I found my dad."

"Holy shit, K."

"Actually, he found me. And it wasn't the reunion I'd always dreamed of. It was a complete shitshow, if I'm being honest."

"You can say that again," I add.

"There's still some shit going on between us, and I'm looking for information."

"You really think she's going to be able to tell you something James and I weren't able to?"

"He doesn't know who I am, huh?" Nikita asks, a sly cockiness laced through her tone.

"Not from me," Keira confirms. "But Nik, he'll know once you show him."

"We'll see about that," she says, turning around the computer chair toward the desk and firing up the gear at the push of her fingertips.

I watch the screens come to life, each displaying a different setup. Cameras to the left, code through the right. There is a blacked-out screen in the center that I'm all too familiar with.

I let out a low whistle. "You've got a type, don't you, little one?"

Nik's eyebrows raise at that little truth.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I’m not telling you shit, lover boy.”

Fair enough. I wouldn’t willingly give over my signature, either. It’s one thing to leave it online for someone to find and know who accessed their information. It’s another thing entirely to share in person.

“So, what are you looking for?” Nikita asks, clicking away.

Keira’s unsure eyes lock on mine. I nod in encouragement, because if she thinks we might learn more about what her father wants, and she trusts this Nikita person, then it’s worth a shot.

“When I was with my father, he told me this story about how my mom found out she was pregnant at school. He also mentioned that my mom wasn’t just someone who got mixed up with the wrong person. That they were from rival families. I don’t know shit about my mom, not really. I’m not even sure if the name I always knew her as was her actual name. Fuck, my last name might not even really be Fitzpatrick. She could have made that shit up.”

“Breathe, sweetness,” I remind her while my hands rub up and down her back. She’s spiraling. I’ve seen it repeatedly over the last couple of months as we’ve worked through what we know. The resurrection of her twin and the miraculous appearance of the father she never knew would be enough for anyone to lose their minds. Add in the kidnapping, rescue, running, and DNA results, it’s a miracle she hasn’t had a complete breakdown.

“Okay, we’ll start simple. What name did you know her by? I can check birth records easily enough. Especially in connection to yours.”

“Claire Fitzpatrick. I think she would have been born here in the city. Probably sometime between 1980 and 1985.”

“Do you know what school they went to?”

“No, he just said it was a Catholic school. One, the families, went to where a truce was held.”

“When you say the families, what do you mean?” Nikita questions, picking up on the emphasized details Keira’s throwing out but not explaining.

“Uhm, like the families of New York’s underground crime syndicates.”

Nikita’s fingers stop tapping against the keys, and her eyes bug out, swinging in our direction. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

At first, I think she’s about to fly off the handle, and my body tenses in preparation. Instead, her face lights up like it’s Christmas, and she’s just been handed the puppy she’s been begging for all year. I’m not sure that I like or trust her reaction. What if she’s tied up with them, and we just walked into the worst person’s apartment for help? She could have Domenico on speed dial, and his thugs could be here in minutes to try to take Keira from me again. She doesn’t miss the movement, and I mindlessly rest my hand on my gun.

“You going to shoot me in my own home?” Nikita asks without a single ounce of worry in her tone.

Keira glances over and hops up the beanbag to stand beside me. “What are you doing?” she bites between clenched teeth.

“Doesn’t she seem just a little too excited about the information?”

Her lips pull up into a small smile, and she shakes her head like I've just said the world's stupidest thing. "Hey, Nik, want to tell Harkin who you work for, so he'll calm the fuck down?"

"Come on, baby girl, his face is priceless. Plus, I don't work for them. I occasionally assist when their MIT-chosen Quantico graduates fail at their tasks. I'm a lone wolf."

"Look, I don't care who the fuck you do or don't work for. You want to be the FBI's bitch, it's not my business. What I do care about is the fact that you seem to think it's a fucking good idea to keep flirting with my girl. The only reason you still have a tongue is out of respect for Keira. But my patience is wearing thin."

The room is dead silent. Keira's shifted so close to me, her chest heaves and brushes against mine with every accelerated breath. Her eyes are filled with a fire that I know all too well and if we were alone, I'd bend her over and test my hunch that she's soaked right now. She's reading me like an open book because she shifts slightly, rubbing her thighs together, and I quirk a quick smile down at her.

A sharp, slow clap breaks our tangential moment on the other side of the room. "Well, aren't you, Mr. Big Psycho? Do you usually go around threatening everyone who looks her way?"

Giving her nothing but disinterest in answering that question, the muscles in my face relax. She's not wrong. If the situation were different, I wouldn't have hesitated to lay the person out. The funny thing is, Keira would do the same if the roles were reversed, and there wouldn't have been any stalling her trigger-happy finger.

"This was obviously a mistake on my part. We're going to go, Nik. Sorry for bringing this shit to your door." Keira looks between the both of us. Linking her fingers between mine and squeezing tight, she pulls us toward the door.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:13 am

TWELVE

KEIRA

Part Goddess Part Gangster - Madalen Duke

I should have known better. It was delusional of me to think reaching out to my ex would be worth the information we might gain. But I figured two hackers would be better than one. Well, one and a half with my budding skills. Maybe it would have been if Harkin hadn't leaned into his old tendencies and hunted me down.

Nik pushing his buttons whenever she saw an opening didn't help his hesitation about the situation. Nik's always been flirty, and it's a huge reason our relationship didn't last. But she clocked his reaction to it the moment she saw him in the hall—their ping-pong bickering since has cut the usefulness of this little adventure short of what I was expecting. I'm done.

My fingers clasp around the knob on the front door when I hear her footsteps slowly approaching.

“Keira, wait.”

My shoulders lift with a frustrated sigh before I swing around to stare her down.
“What, Nik?”

“I'm sorry. Come back in and let me help. I'm willing to call a truce if your man is.”
She offers with her hands up in surrender.

“Why are you so eager to help us? You don’t even know the full story.” Harkin steps in, asking about the thing that’s been floating around in my head, too.

I wasn’t sure if she’d help me when I showed up here. Nik’s work life was always so hush-hush when we were together. The computer stuff was blatantly obvious. I mean, her setup wasn’t quite as elaborate back then, but that damn laptop had been attached to her hip. The only reason I know what I do is thanks to how chatty she gets after one too many J?ger Bombs.

“Well, I don’t know what Keira’s told you about us?—”

“Nothing,” Harkin says, cutting her off.

I shake my head, realizing we’re almost back to square one, but Nik ignores him and continues.

“—but we didn’t end things on a bad note.”

“And that’s it? You’re just doing this for an old friend?”

“Girlfriend.”

They’re fucking children.

Then I remind myself I wanted to dismember my twin when I saw her flirting with Harkin. Maybe they just need to work through it on their own.

“And no. I’ll admit, it’s not selfless on my end.”

“See, sweetness, I knew this was a bad idea. Let’s go.” He grips my arm and pulls me back toward the front door.

“It could connect to some of my work,” Nikita spits out in the commotion of Harkin trying to manhandle me.

“Personal or the agency?”

“Both,” she answers, but doesn’t expand on it.

“Okay. But you two need to squash the bullshit. No more flirting, Nik. As hard as that might be for you.” I laugh and swing in Harkin’s direction and poke his chest. “And you.”

But his firm hold grabs my finger. He leans down, lips skating against my cheek before resting against my ear. “And you, little one, already have enough to answer for when we get home. So, I’d stop adding to the list if I were you.” His gruff tone sends shivers down my spine. But the quick nip to my ear he leaves me with has my libido springing into overdrive.

He doesn’t acknowledge the threat. The one that has me wishing I would have let him pull me from the apartment so we could be heading back to the house. Instead, he’s leading me back into the living room. This time, he grabs a chair and pulls my body down on top of his. His strong arm bands around my stomach, holding me tightly against his chest.

“Where did we leave things?” Nik asks, facing her computer screens.

“Uhm, my mom. Where she went to school, I think? Which is where my information ends. I just know it was Catholic and in the city. She was fifteen when she had us.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. So, I’m kind of a twin.”

“No shit? I can’t imagine dealing with two of you.”

“We’re nothing alike.”

“They’re very different,” Harkin and I both spit out at the same time.

“Okay, then. Twins would be easier to pinpoint at a hospital. Maybe I can get her real information and do more digging with that? Do you know where you were born?”

“Not at a hospital. I don’t even know if our births were registered.”

“How’s that possible? You have a social security number.”

“Yeah, sweetness. How’s that possible?” Harkin asks, knowing damn well my papers aren’t exactly legal.

“That’s an even longer story. But let’s just say the number I have now is thanks to someone else.”

“Jesus, woman, how much shit were you keeping from me?”

“More than I’d like to admit or get into right now. I just thought that with your work, you might have a little more insight or some contacts who might know more about the families. Considering my dad’s Italian and my mom’s Irish, I hoped that’d help narrow some stuff down.”

“Okay. It’s a start.” She nods. “I’ll see what I can dig up, but I can’t promise anything.”

“We’re not looking for you to have the answers. Maybe something you find will match up with what we know and reveal something we’ve been overlooking this

entire time, you know?”

“Give me a few days, and I’ll get back to you. Based on all of this, I’m assuming your number’s changed?”

Harkin lifts me off his lap to stand. He drops the white card onto her desk and shoves it across the surface with a single finger. “We’ll see how good you really are.” He turns without a word and strides to the front door, not looking back.

“Uhm, I should probably go now,” I say, hiking my thumb over my shoulder. “Thanks, Nik. It was really good to see you after all these years.”

“You too, baby girl. Stay safe,” she says in a whisper, probably trying to avoid the ire of my broody man.

There isn’t a blacked-out SUV waiting for us on the curb like I’d expected. Instead, Harkin leads us down the busy sidewalk with his heavy hand and the base of my spine. He doesn’t look down at me or speak, but I follow his guidance. After a few blocks, we stop in front of a small café.

The place isn’t busy when we step inside, but the smell of freshly ground coffee and pastries invades my system, and my mouth waters. Harkin must be on the same wavelength because he steps up to the counter and orders for us. When we have our food and drinks, he nods to a small table in the way back, near the fire exit.

His sulking only builds the anxiety blossoming in my chest as I wait for him to sit with me on the loveseat and tell me what the plan is. I’d assumed we’d head back to the rental, but he doesn’t seem as quick to get out of the city as I’d imagined. I settle in and let the buttery, soft croissant melt in my mouth. The satisfied moan that tumbles from my lips finally gets Harkin’s attention poised back on me—his eyebrow peaks, and I shrug because it really is that good.

“So, will you tell me what’s going on?”

He scoffs and looks down at his phone, typing away. I feel like I’m being chastised via the silent treatment, and I’m seconds away from lashing out childishly. But when his phone rings, and he lifts it to his ear, his face turns serious as he listens to whoever’s on the other line.

“Send me the pin and then clear it. We need a couple of hours to discuss a few things.” His eyes swing in my direction, and his gaze rakes across my body. The fire in them burns so hot I feel it across my skin.

“Who was that?” I ask when he ends the call and drops his phone in his lap.

“Finish your pastry, and let’s go. We can talk when we get there.”

“Get where, Harkin?”

“Where we’re going,” he says, then shoves the small plate back in my direction to emphasize his last request.

I’m getting nowhere with him. He’s on edge, watching the café as if someone’s going to run in and snatch us up in broad daylight. I polish off the magical croissant and wish I had another.

We take our drinks to go and head out the fire exit. A mix of rotten food, stagnant water, and piss fills the air in the tight alleyway. My stomach revolts, threatening to bring up my snack, but I clamp a hand over my mouth and follow Harkin’s footpath out to fresh air. Something most people wouldn’t think about the sidewalk area of the city. But anything’s better than where we’ve come from.

My irritation only rises as I follow Harkin mindlessly. We make it a few more blocks

before he heads down to the subway. He ushers me to sit while he stands guard in front of me. He's scanning the crowd again, and I'm starting to fear something I don't know made my trip into the city an even worse decision than being slightly reckless. Whatever it is, I need to know. If something's happened, he can't keep it from me.

Secrets we share give zero power to those that necessitated them. It's the secrets we hide that burden our shoulders to the point that we both suffer, usually in silence. We promised no more secrets once the paternity results were aired out. I intend to hold him to our agreement. I'll just have to see how creative I'll need to be to pull them free.

The subway stops, sending both of our bodies jolting to the side. Harkin drops his hand from the pole and holds it out for me, which is the only indication we're exiting here. As we emerge above ground, he surprises me when he heads straight for the curb to the unmarked car idling there. Without checking the driver, he pulls open the backdoor and guides me inside before sliding in after me and closing the door.

It's stifling in here, with the heat turned on full blast as if we're still in the dead of winter. I peel out of my coat and cram it on the floor near my feet.

"He sent you the pin?" Harkin asks the man in the driver's seat.

"Yes, sir. Are we heading straight there?"

"Yes, but don't take the direct route."

"No problem. We'll be there in about forty-five minutes with current traffic."

"Very well. Excuse us." Harkin ends the conversation by pressing a button and raising the partition between the front and back of the town car.

His body shifts in my direction, and his shoulders relax. It's the first time since I saw him in the hall where he looks like the man I'm used to and not the hard shell he puts on for the rest of the world.

"Do you want to tell me what made you decide that coming into the city alone while I was out of town was a wise choice?"

"Do you want to share why you showed up?" I cross my arms over my chest and lean back, creating more distance between us.

"Oh, I know you're not stupid, sweetness. Don't ask questions you already know the answer to."

I let out an annoyed huff. I know how he found me; that's the easy part of the puzzle, but the reason is slightly unclear, even if he thought it was black and white. Was it simply because he didn't want me alone in the city?

"You weren't supposed to be back yet."

"And you thought you could just slip away to the city, and we'd be none the wiser?" He laughs.

Well, when he puts it like that, I feel stupid. "Did you track me?"

"Of course," he says without hesitation, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"But how did you know?"

"Your search history."

"Wait, what? How?"

“Again, with the stupid questions. I think that’s enough from you.” His voice drops low, and his frame grows in the small space. He looks down at the black watch adorned on his inked wrist. “And would you look at that? We still have thirty-eight minutes for you to come clean.” The wicked way his mouth turns up is my only warning before his body engulfs mine.

THIRTEEN

HARKIN

Taste of the Divine - Shaker, Zee, CObrA

She seemed surprised I'd keep tabs on her computer's search history. Her laptop, phone, and body are all mine to trace at any given moment. Did it cross personal boundaries? Maybe to people who weren't us. But we are who we are. A girl who grew up living through one horrific situation only to trade it for another and another. And a boy who was only starting to unravel the fucked-up mess his family chose to tangle the Greyson name in. Yet, a twisted sense of fate brought the two together—a catalyst for both families' futures.

She's been uneasy since we left Nikita's. Her anxiety and anger grow the longer I let the quiet build between us. It was easy to spot on the subway. I watched her hands continually ball into fists and release to settle herself. When that didn't work, her anger took hold.

My chest pushes against hers, shoving her flush against the car door. Her head connects with the glass, but my girl doesn't react to the slight bite of pain. Unsure eyes watch me, waiting to see what I'll do next.

The blush on her cheeks tinges a shade darker now that we're alone and pressed together. Walls I erected earlier to process are ready to be torn down so we can share what's on our minds. But what fun is a simple conversation when we can play a game? One where she refuses to tell me what happened and instead fights me at every

turn with her smart mouth and defiant eyes. Open communication in a relationship was easy for those who didn't have to fight through their trauma every day. What worked for them didn't work for us. But what does, works so fucking well.

“Are you going to tell me what drove you to the city, sweetness?” I whisper, letting my tongue peek out and trace the curve of her ear.

Her breath hitches at the sensation, but she doesn't answer.

“Were you just looking to catch up with an old friend ?”

I reach down to grip her right wrist squished between our bodies and the bench seat. My other moves in tandem to find her left, which is already twisting in the fabric of my shirt. With both in my hands, I bring them up above her head to clasp tightly, but when they bump against the seatbelt, an idea forms in my mind.

With one hand free, I pluck the knife from my waistband and flip open the gleaming blade. Her eyes lock on the sharp edge, but it's not fear that dances there. It's excitement. I glide the smooth metal up the thick fabric covering her body. It doesn't have the same effect as when I get to play it against her bare flesh, but it'll do for now.

“Harkin, what—” she pushes out but breaks off when the blade disappears behind her head.

I slice the seatbelt into two pieces, gripping the top piece's end before it disappears into the car's compartment. Stowing the knife's blade between my teeth, I wrap the thick fabric around her wrists tightly, tying it off. When she pulls against them, it has the opposite desired effect. Her hands don't break free. Instead, the seatbelt mechanism locks and pulls them tight to the edge of the seat.

I pull back, taking the knife from my mouth, and sit back on my side of the car, admiring my little trussed-up prize. It's too bad I didn't think to remove her clothes first. Her ire is about to build tenfold. I grip the collar of her thin t-shirt, the backs of my knuckles brushing against the swell of her full breasts.

"You wouldn't!" she says indignantly, but knowing damn well I would and will.

"Give me a reason, little one, and this will go differently," I offer.

"I wanted to help," she spits out.

"A half-truth doesn't count." And as the words tumble from my lips, the first notes of the fabric tearing fill the air.

"You fucking asshole," she seethes, pulling against the seatbelt, but when she remembers it's no use, she tries the next option. Her leg starts to lift, and her booted foot is on a trajectory to cause some severe pain.

Thinking just as quickly, I capture her thighs, swinging my right leg over both to lock them between my thighs. It doesn't stop her from bucking wildly. Her taut body fights my hold with every ounce of strength she has. But I'm more than willing to wait until she tires herself out. When she finally settles and quiets—I can only imagine what the driver thinks is going on back here—I let the standing question hang between us.

"I knew Nikita might be able to uncover something we haven't figured out on our own."

The tip of my blade pushes under the small lace band of her black see-through bra.

"Harkin, don't you dare."

The delicate fabric slices like butter, exposing her breasts, and they're calling me home like a siren song. Leaning forward, I wrap my lips around her already hard nipple. When my teeth pull at the sensitive flesh, a keening moan encourages my ministrations. I plan to deny her, but the sounds she's making hypnotize me under her spell. She reins it in only when I let the blade dance across her skin to the other peaked bud.

"Always the temptress," I breathe against her skin. "So sinful, so sweet."

I let the sharp blade nick along the curve of her areola. The tiniest beads of bright red crimson blossom under the pressure. Her breath hitches as she watches in fascination. I halt the blade's journey when the blood begins to drip down her milky skin. I enjoy running my fingers through the rich color, smearing it like Jackson Pollock working on my next famed piece, her body the stretched canvas ready for my creative madness. The car hits a bump in the road and my hand shifts, taking the blade with it. It meets the tattooed flesh on her ribs, adding more color to the brilliant, deep shades of green and purple.

"Tell me your safe word, little one."

"Black," she answers right away.

"So, you wanted to help? And thought Nikita was the way to go about that?" I ask while unbuttoning her tight jeans and shoving them to lock around her knees.

"Yes, that's all. I swear," she pleads, eager to turn this little game on its head.

"Why go alone? You could have told James. He could have escorted you."

She scoffs at my question, but it's the unconscious roll of her eyes that has me sucking my top teeth and breaking out into a menacing smile. She realizes a moment

too late, and those same offending eyes grow wide with the knowledge of what comes next.

“Oh, that was naughty, little one. And to think, you already have so many strikes against you today.”

“I’m sorry, Sir. I didn’t—” Her excuse cuts off when the knife slides close to her pussy.

“Tell me... do you think my pretty pink cunt”—I slap the blade against the thin silk fabric covering what’s mine—“is wet enough for me to fuck you with this?” I flip the blade in my hand, offering the handle in example.

She rocks her hips back, away from me, not feeling too keen on that idea. But I’ve got one better.

“Hmm, but you’re a greedy whore for me, aren’t you, baby? I think I’d need to fuck you with”—I leave the handle outstretched and reach behind me to pull my pistol free from its holster—“this to make you come.” I weigh them between us in the air as if trying to decide which option is the best.

The answer is obvious, and I flip the blade closed, tucking it away for safekeeping. I let the tip of the pistol drag between her breasts that heave in anticipation. The deadly steel glides smoothly down her quivering stomach to the edge of her panties. I wish her blood was still flowing freely. I’d trace it across her flesh in beautiful designs just to see the way she’d beg me to finally fuck her with it. I’ll just have to find another way to make her scream her desires.

“Last chance to come clean, sweetness. After this, there won’t be any stopping until the truth is ripped from your lips on a moan.”

“I’ve told you the truth, Sir. Please don’t do this here.”

“You know, I’d believe you, baby, except that I know your tells, and you might be giving me part of the story, but there’s something you’re leaving out sweetness.”

Eyes darting away from me, she focuses on the partition.

“He can’t hear you, little one. Your screams of pain and pleasure are all mine.”

Her body relaxes slightly, and I know that changes things for her. Shoving the muzzle against the hood of her clit, a sharp hiss drags in through her teeth, and it’s the starting gun I need. I move the barrel in small circles, and before I know it, her hips are working in tandem with the weapon.

“More,” she cries.

I pull back, controlling the speed and pressure, until she takes the hint and stops moving. “Good girl. Now stay still for me, little one.”

My cock throbs against my jeans, begging to join in on the fun. I readjust in the cramped space and use the opportunity to shove her pants down to her ankles. The change helps me spread her wide, exposing the drenched fabric concealing my prize.

“Fuck, you’re soaked for me.”

I lose myself in the moment, drop the gun to my lap, and grip the thin straps on her hips. I pull hard and fast, and the fabric tears quickly. “I think these are for me,” I tell her, inhaling her scent before shoving her underwear into my back pocket.

Now that she’s utterly bare before me, I can’t help but take in her beauty. Her hands tied taut; her body stretched across the back seat, still anchored by the clothes I was

too impatient to remove. Her eyes are taking on the glassy glow she gets when we fall into our dynamic. A flush blends with the swipes of blood bright against her alabaster skin. Her full lips are slightly parted, waiting to plead for me to stop or continue. It's intoxicating, and I haven't even gotten a taste of her delicious cunt yet.

That drives me forward, shoving my body awkwardly into the tight space of the car's floor. Her feet are caught under me, locking her in place. My nose traces up her wet slit, my tongue following suit. Her flavor dances across my tongue, and a low growl of possessive pleasure rumbles in my chest.

I still haven't forgotten her choice to traipse into the city to see an ex alone. One that thought she could get away with touching my girl in any fucking manner, including ghosting her lips where only mine should be.

I pick up my pace, flicking and circling her clit until she's writhing from the sensation and moments away from drowning me with her juices. Her thighs push in, trying to tighten around my head. But I shove them back with my forearms, overexposing her core.

"I'm so close, Sir, please may I come."

What a good girl for asking. "No," I bark against her skin and retreat.

Her hips follow, desperate for the slightest touch to set her off, but she won't find it in this car. We'll play this game until she's a quivering mess of incoherent words. Once her body's calmed, I lift the gun and run it up and down her slit, stopping at her entrance to lube the muzzle just enough to slide it in the slightest bit. The new sensation rips her heavy eyes open. Something left unsaid dances at the tip of her tongue.

"Color, little one?" I check in because she might have agreed to inanimate objects,

but I doubt she had her mind set on something so deadly.

“Yel—Green.” She changes her mind at the last minute.

I pause, focusing on her gaze, reading the truth behind the words. She’s nervous, but not enough for it to control her desire to try something new. When she doesn’t go back on her word, I let the pleasure begin.

Her tight cunt swallows the shaft, inch by inch. Arousal drips from her drenched entrance, pooling on the leather below. She’ll have to clean that up before we leave, but it comes in handy when the gun finds no resistance to bottom out.

“How does it feel being such a dirty whore that you’ll let me fuck you with the nearest, deadliest thing?”

“It makes me feel alive,” she pants.

It’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I keep the pace slow and teasing, knowing it’s nothing close to what she’ll need to come, not even with the added sensation of my fingers rounding her clit. The leisurely climb takes minutes, but I could watch her unravel for hours.

“Eyes on me, little one.”

They rise and focus, waiting for my next request. My hands don’t slow, fucking her smoothly in tandem. I watch for just the right moment. The sign that euphoria is about to descend and wash her away. When I see it cross her face, I pull everything free.

“Suck it clean for me,” I order, with a tap against her lips.

She doesn't disappoint licking the barrel clean of her nectar. My cock revolts in my jeans, throbbing painfully, desperate to be the thing her tongue is savoring like a popsicle on the hottest New York summer day. Unfortunately, for me, we're not in a position to make that happen. We'll have to keep this rolling when we get to the safe house.

As the thought comes to mind, the car rolls to a stop and sets back from parking. I push the small intercom button against the back seat.

"Give us a minute, and we'll be out."

"Of course, Sir. Take your time."

FOURTEEN

KEIRA

Easy to Love - Bryce Savage

I 'm barely hanging on to the conscious world around me. My entire body tingles, like a limb waking from sleep. But it's my throbbing pussy that keeps me from blacking out entirely. I need to come. It's the only thing I can focus on. Not the fact that we've stopped or what Harkin is saying. My body seeks friction against his leg as he does something above me. The rough fabric feels like heaven against my abused clit, and if I can just keep?—

The harsh slap comes down on my swollen sex, and I scream at the contact. Not from pain but frustration, from yet again being denied the pleasure my body is desperate to find by any means necessary.

Rough fingers grip my cheeks, directing my gaze up. "Don't you dare try to steal your orgasms from me, little one. We're nowhere near done with your punishment."

His threat lands, and tears prick my eyes as I acknowledge I'm not coming anytime soon. Sometimes, I wonder if my stubbornness is worth the trouble it always causes. I could just spit out the rest of the truth behind my trip to the city. Yet, the devil on my shoulder eggs me on, trying to convince me that the pain and torture are worth the pleasure that eventually comes.

My raw wrists are gently placed in my lap. Harkin pulls my pants back into place and

wraps me in my discarded jacket, zipping it up to keep my exposed flesh covered. He shoves the back door my body has been using for support open and lifts me in his arms to exit the backseat. My head hangs heavy, landing in the crook of his neck. I should take the opportunity to pay attention to my surroundings. But his scent is intoxicating, filling my system with my current drug of choice.

I nuzzle in closer, licking his salty pulse point up to his ear before whispering, “My pussy is throbbing for you, Sir. She wants to be stuffed full of your thick cock before coating it in my thanks for letting me come for you.”

My ride halts, and heavy breaths fall against my cheek. I know he’s staring at me, but the needy words I just expressed have left me feeling emboldened. “Let me come, and I’ll tell you why.”

His exuberant laughter encases me completely. “You little tease. Do you think a few dirty words whispered in my ear are going to get you what you want? What about what I want, sweetness? What if I want you so dazed out of your mind with the need to come that I can do any wicked thought that comes to mind? How do you feel about that?”

“Yes, please.” I let the soft words filter between us before ending with Sir and a bite to his earlobe.

Gravel crunches underfoot, and then a heavy thud of a door closing shuts out the real world. In here, just the two of us is a darker, more depraved reality that I relish every time he drags me to it. I’m dropped from the safe hammock of his arms onto a cold, narrow table. The jolt of temperature difference focuses my mind, and I finally take in our surroundings.

The walls are concrete bricks layered from floor to ceiling, both of which are made of the same substance. The echo here must be deafening but contained in the small

space. There are no windows to let in the daylight. The only exit is the handleless metal door partially blocked by Harkin's frame. Besides the medical table beneath me, rows and rows of instruments line the countertops along the walls. A chill skates up my spine. This room only has two purposes—mending or torture—and I don't require the former.

“Where are we?”

“A new safe house in the city.”

“And this?” I gesture around the room.

“A possibility for what's to come.”

He descends on me like a predator tired of stalking its weakened prey. His fingers dig into the base of my hair, using the hold to drag me backward. Before my ass slides off the end, he yanks me supine, my head perfectly angled to hang off the edge.

The bulge behind his jeans is right at eye level, giving me the view of a lifetime when he shoves his jeans and briefs down to his ankles before kicking them away. My mouth waters, saliva pooling at the roof of my mouth. My tongue peeks out, running along my top lip in anticipation.

“Is my girl hungry?” he teases, stroking his hardness just out of reach.

“Please, let me suck your cock, Sir,” I beg. “Let me make you feel good.”

“Oh, you will, don't worry. Now open wide for me, little one,” he says between clenched teeth.

“Wait,” I all but scream when I realize my hands are still stuck within the confines of

my jacket. “My hands.”

Harkin looks over my body, realization dawning on his face. He doesn't move to unzip it and free me like I expect. Instead, a sinister smile creeps across his face and settles in place.

“Use your foot. The same signal, understood?” His fingers caress the side of my face.

My brain slowly processes his information, mentally tallying if I can remember to double tap with that part of my body if the need arises. His fingers trace my lips tenderly when my confidence is confirmed vocally for him. It's all a ruse to relax me before they grip my chin, forcing my mouth open wide. His crown lands on my tongue before I can draw in a deep breath, and the soft velvet of his shaft moves forward quickly.

I'm full of him, enough to choke, but I breathe through my nose and relax my throat so he can fuck me as deeply as he wants. There's something invigorating in letting him use my body as nothing more than an object that he can derive pleasure from, especially amid the craziness that is our life.

He hits the back of my throat, and I choke, desperate to draw air into my burning lungs. My vision blurs from the buildup of unshed tears. Saliva joins the messy display of devotion my face is becoming.

“Fuck, little one. You're taking me so well,” he groans.

My pussy clenches, wishing it wasn't still hidden away inside my jeans at the other end of the table, being wholly denied any sense of pleasure.

“Take a deep breath, sweetness. It'll be your last until I coat your throat.” His gravelly tone is pure sexual desire.

When his hips push forward, the table keeps my head in place as his cock slides down my throat. I squeeze my eyes shut at the unnatural feeling while his hand glides against my throat. The sensation makes my need for air more evident in my mind. It's at that exact moment the panic starts to set in that I feel his fingers reach between us and clamp down on my nostrils, cutting off my air completely.

He wasn't being facetious when he told me it would be my last breath. Picking up a punishing pace, his cock never leaves my mouth. Only pulling out enough to glide against the soft, warm space before diving back in. He swells, growing indecently fuller than I can take. My body is screaming for the chance to draw in a breath, my chest aching and limbs twitching.

The idea to tap out dances through the fog in my brain, my consciousness not quite grasping it before my vision grows blurry while stars of different colors dance around the corners. A guttural moan rips through the room, accompanied by heavy breathing, just as the lights turn out completely.

I feel the sharp slap against my cheek, the broken words being yelled right in my ear.

"Dammit, Keira. Open those beautiful eyes for me, you stubborn, wicked woman. I swear to God, if you did this on purpose, I'll whip your ass until you can't sit for a week."

I let his threat land, and my body comes to under his ministration to bring me back to a state of consciousness. I wish I could let him worry just a bit longer, but I'm pushed to heave in a lungful of air, gasping as my body shoots up further, bending over my lap.

I'm cradled in Harkin's arms on the floor, his worried eyes dancing around my face. The worry calms a little too quickly when he sees my lips quirk up at the corner.

“Is it my turn now?” I cough out, trying to distill the tension radiating from his aura.

He doesn’t let me bait him into more of our give-and-take. I knew my limit, and I let him pass it. That’s not on him; it was all me, and I’ll make sure he knows it as soon as my voice can come out as more than a whisper. His assault on my throat is beyond evident. I wonder if it’ll look swollen from the outside, even though it feels as though the entire passage has shriveled up.

I notice he’s still half naked when his arms tighten around my upper back and under my knees. He lifts us both from the floor in one fluid motion, heading straight for the cracked metal door. He doesn’t stop in the small living area. It’s an industrial style, a lot like his apartment in Brooklyn.

“Harkin?”

“Not right now, Keira. I need a second.”

My stomach ties into a knot at the drop of my name. He rarely uses it, but when he does, I know shit’s serious. A nervous energy courses through my veins, and I sink into my mind a little further, distressed that I might have taken things too far. He warned me once we couldn’t continue this if he couldn’t trust me. But I genuinely felt safe enough to take that leap over the ledge.

I’m placed gently on the softest bed before his hands quickly remove my shoes, jeans, and jacket. The mounting silence feels like a physical presence taking up space between us. He ushers me under the covers, tucking me in without saying a word before he turns on his heels and heads for a small door across the room.

I curl in on myself, bringing the edge of the comforter under my chin. Before I can let the depressing thoughts encroach on my foggy brain, he’s back, a glass of water and a couple of pills in his hand.

“Open,” he demands, sitting beside me on the bed.

I do, and the pills hit my tongue. The glass following close behind. I drain it slowly, letting the cold water soothe and wash away the evidence of the uncoated medicine. He discards the cup on the nightstand. Reaching an arm over his head, he pulls free his t-shirt, throwing it to the floor next to the bed.

I lift the covers and slide toward the middle of the mattress. Once he’s settled underneath, his strong arm wraps around my body, folding me into him. My leg slides against his, hiking up around his waist as my upper body drapes across his chest, leaving me lying more on top of him than on the mattress. My fingers swirl against his chest, chasing the rise and fall of his accelerated breathing.

“I’m sorry,” tumbles out, frantic to bridge the chasm building quickly in the stillness.

Warm fingers drag up and down my spine, stopping every few passes to play in my hair. His chest heaves on an endless sigh, lifting my body with its efforts. My gaze leaves the safety of his inked chest, drifting up until it meets his, unsteady in return.

“Do you know how often I’ve thought about death since the accident?”

Not wanting to put a number on the morbid question, I shake my head in answer.

“Almost every day. After it happened, I was consumed with guilt. I tortured myself by living in the grief of repeating that night in my head over and over. I thought about her death until it twisted into contemplating my own. The alcohol and drugs were a numbing agent that made it better, or worse, depending on the day.”

My eyes prick with tears, hearing the pain radiating through his truth. I squeeze my body closer, wanting to provide a semblance of noiseless support.

“Life in New York was better for me, but I was still only surviving. Each day was the same. Work, sleep, gym, repeat, until you. You tore away the darkness, shadow by shadow, like an avenging angel. But that was before I really got to know you.” He lets out a small laugh.

My fingers dig into his side, pinching the skin in retaliation. I still don’t butt in. Letting him have the space to continue whatever this is, knowing damn well it’s leading somewhere I’m wary about.

“What you just did, making me watch the light being snuffed out of your eyes at my hands. Keira, I—I couldn’t live with myself if I lost you. I don’t think you understand how much I love you. With every fucked-up inch of my damaged soul.”

My breath hitches at the declaration, my limbs moving to straddle his lap. I lean down, holding his face in my hands. “Harkin, I—” I break off, clearing my throat. The soreness creeps in more fully with my emotions clogging the way.

“I don’t expect you to say anything back, sweetness. I know?—”

“Will you shut up, so I can tell you I fucking love you too?” The world stops around us as I let the words I’ve held close to my chest for months loose, and then it’s like time finally catches up at top speed.

His lips slam into mine with the ferocity of a starved animal. We’re all tongue and teeth and lips. My hips grind against his stiff shaft, tilting at just the right angle to sheath him to the hilt. Lost in the moment, I wasn’t sure we’d ever make it to. Harkin makes love to me until we’re both sweaty and breathless.

Coming down from our euphoria, I smile when he whispers against my skin. “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

FIFTEEN

HARKIN

Bonnie & Clyde - Rosenfeld

The silent night creeps in around us. The only light comes in from the crack of the barely open bedroom door. My eyes adjusted as the hours passed, letting me watch Keira as she slept soundly on my chest. I relish every minuscule detail, memorizing them for my own personal catalog: her hair a wild mess of long locks, the freckles dotted along her cheekbones, and her thick eyelashes resting close as she snoozes peacefully.

The mechanical latch of a door somewhere off in the house pulls me from my obsessive observations. Based on the two sets of quiet feet and the excited thudding of paws heading in my direction, James and Stacey have finally arrived. Sliding free from under Keira's warmth, I kiss her forehead just in time for the excited pup to come charging into the room.

She pauses, dropping on her haunches when she sees me sitting up in bed. "Okay, fine. Take my spot, you spoiled brat," I whisper and get up, making space for her to cuddle in next to her favorite person.

Throwing on a pair of sweats from my carry-on, I latch the bedroom door behind me quietly before heading in search of James. I find him getting set up in the small dining room off the kitchen. The coffee pot is already crackling to life, filling the space with its fragrant aroma.

“You guys could have waited until morning,” I say, grabbing a couple of mugs.

“It is morning,” he deadpans.

I look over at the time on the oven. Three forty-five displays in bright green. “The type of morning normal people adhere to.”

“Semantics.”

Ain’t that the fucking truth.

“Plus, suburbia with blondie was too domestic.”

“Right. You keep telling yourself that,” I tease, smacking him on the back and handing over the mug of black coffee.

“What went down once you intersected, Keira?”

“A mess of fucking massive proportions. It turns out she was visiting a friend of the ex-variety. One with skills to rival mine, apparently. She seems to have access to government databases I don’t mess with.”

“Interesting. I didn’t find anyone with those connections when I looked into Keira.”

“Well, if she’s as good as Keira thinks she is, that would make sense. But anyway, she told her about the situation. A little more than I would have liked, but Nikita said she’d do some digging and get back to us. I gave her my card.”

“We can’t bank on her knowing anything we don’t already know. I say we just get back to planning a trip to the coordinates you sent over,” James suggests.

“Were you able to get a copy of the blueprints for the building?” I ask.

“Yeah, my contact was able to pull them from the city. The problem is that the latest version is eighty years old, and there’s no mention of any remodeling done at the site. Based on the video you sent, compared to the prints, I can’t locate a possible area that would make sense. That room was subterranean. The prints only show maintenance tunnels below the body of the building.”

“That’s something. The building was originally a school, and then that portion closed, but they’ve kept the church up and running. If they’ve been bought off, I’m not surprised expansions or renos never made it into the city’s database,” I add.

“I can have someone go take a look and report back,” he offers.

“Yeah, based on the message with the video, they’re waiting for me. It’ll be a trap either way, but we might as well go in prepared.”

“We’ll have something by noon,” James confirms. “Oh, and I’ve sent over everything I found about the missing money from your dad’s company. It doesn’t look good.”

I expected as much. From what little I could get into between getting my mom situated and heading back on a cross-country flight, the news reports seemed more likely than I’d wanted to admit. The click of his laptop closing pulls my eyes from my screen.

“This place has a gym, right?”

“Downstairs somewhere. We haven’t taken a tour yet.”

His eyes narrow, scrutinizing, before adding, “Stacey went up to sleep. She’ll be out for a while. I’ll see you later.”

The only sound keeping me company when the silence creeps back in is the rhythmic tapping against my keys as I scour through the information James sent over. I'm looking for the smallest detail that could lead to a rabbit hole of information. So far, no luck. Though there's this feeling deep in my gut that I'm missing something so blatantly obvious, it's driving me mad.

Dawn breaks through the skyline, lighting the open area with a golden glow. I'm finishing off my third cup of coffee and pushing the laptop away to take a break when the creak of a door sounds down the hall. Soft footfalls signal her approach before a sleep-weary Keira pokes around the corner, the dark sheet wrapped around her body. I'd gotten caught up in the search and forgot to drop her bag in the room.

Her body folds onto my lap, curling into me. "Mm, I wondered where you'd gone. Sneaking away from my bed to be with your true love, huh?"

I laugh at her quip, pulling her in tighter against my chest. A satisfied purr rumbles from her chest. "Someone was snoring and woke me up early."

She quickly untangles her hand from the sheet, slapping me across the chest. Leaving me access to her naked body as the sheet falls open to her waist. I stare greedily, marking the bruises and bite marks from last night.

"I do not snore," she says adamantly, pulling my attention away from her hard nipples.

"If you insist, sweetness. But now that you're awake, we need to settle what got pushed to the side last night."

"What do you mean?" Her face scrunches up in what seems to be genuine confusion. The look is a change from her standard resting bitch face that I'm used to being thrown my way.

“Your trip to the city. Out with it. Why did you really go on your own instead of waiting for me to get back.”

Her entire body deflates in my arms, a huge sigh leaving on a loud exhale. “It’s not fair, you know?”

“What’s not?”

“The way you read me. I hate it.”

My fingers latch onto her chin, redirecting her gaze from the kitchen cabinets to my face. “That’s my responsibility, sweetness. You decided to put your trust in me as your Dom. Yes, we may not live a twenty-four-seven lifestyle like some, but that care and notice doesn’t automatically switch off for me when we exit a scene. What do you expect to happen when you take off without a word, turn off your phone, and try to avoid me? You know I won’t let you go. I do think you wanted to help, and your idea was smart. But there was no reason you needed to do it how you did. So, I’ll ask you one last time, and I expect the truth, Keira.”

She’s eerily still in my lap, holding her breath as she weighs what I’ve just told her. Every last word is the truth. And then I watch the defiance wash out of her mind and body.

“You discovered something in California. I don’t know what it is because you refused to tell me, but you told James.” She pauses, but there’s still more on the tip of her tongue, so I wait. “You’re mine, Harkin. It’s been you and me for months, and then the moment we get back to New York, you cut me out. It pissed me off. So, I figured if you wanted to play things that way, I’d figure some shit out on my own. Maybe then you’d realize I’m more than just a piece that needs keeping safe.”

Her words sink in. My body wants to react with a laugh, but that’ll fuck up the

openness between us. “Baby, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me! I didn’t want to tell you over video chat. I had every intention of telling you when I returned from my trip. The only reason I told James was so he could reach out to a contact of his and get blueprints for the coordinates I needed information on by the time I was wheels down.” My hands grip the sides of her face, holding it inches from mine. “You headstrong woman. I’ve never thought of you as only a liability to keep safe. I know you can do that on your own. I feel sorry for anyone that gets in your way. But I won’t apologize for doing everything under the fucking sun to keep you safe. Because I love you, Keira. You’re my world. My reason for breathing. We could leave this place behind. Say fuck everyone else involved and let them deal with all the shit they’ve caused. Just say the word.”

Her eyes are glossed over and a tear threatens to fall from the corner. She looks more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen her, and that’s saying something.

Her lips finally tip up in a shy smile. “You know we can’t do that.”

“We could. You’re the most important thing to me. Let my dad lie in the bed he made. Domenico can have him.”

“Domenico has your dad?”

“It seems that way. Though I suppose it’s possible, with him being wrapped up with Domenico, he could have business with other men who cut off fingers to send a message.”

“Jesus. But no, we’re not running from this. I’m not going to spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders, wondering if the person across the street was sent to take us out or kidnap me again. I need to know what Domenico wants from me. You need to get your dad out of this. And I need to go to the clinic for the procedure.”

“You’re too good for them, you know that,” I tell her.

“That’s what sets us apart.” She winks, leaning forward to brush those soft lips against mine. “Now, please tell me there’s more coffee?”

“Our bags are in the living room. Why don’t you go hop in the shower, and I’ll make a fresh pot.”

“My hero.”

The entire house is finally awake and surrounding the coffee table in the small living room. James heard from his contact, who scouted the location, reporting that a whole section of the church was blocked off, with a little too much security. It’s where we’ll start.

“You’re not coming,” Keira tells Stacey.

“Why not? I’m the only one they won’t be expecting.”

“Don’t be naïve. My father’s been watching me for much longer than I want to think about. He’ll know exactly who you are. Plus, you don’t mean shit to him. If you get in the way, I wouldn’t put it past his men to put a bullet between your eyes.”

“But—”

“No.” James’s rough tone cuts through her persistence. “You’ll stay here.”

How they stare at each other, having a silent conversation all their own, is beyond telling. But she relents and sits back against the couch, crossing her arms over her chest in a sullen pout.

“This video they sent to his inbox had nothing else to say? Just the coordinates in the email? Were you able to trace who sent it or from where?”

“Look at my little protégée. Knowing all the right questions to ask.” I lean into her, kissing her temple as she preens under my compliment.

“The IP address pinged to a computer at the church. They didn’t even try to mask it since they weren’t trying to hide the location.”

“Do you really think they’re keeping him hidden at the church?” Keira asks.

“I think they want it to look that way. But if it were me, he’d have been taken elsewhere before the email was sent. They want us to rush in, and it’s the perfect time for Domenico to get his hands on you, and if not you, then me. He knows that’s just as good.”

“Aren’t you guys just playing into his hand?” Stacey throws out, more observant than I’d expect from her.

“I’ve got that part covered. The bodies on the door aren’t an issue. We get in, check the space and get out. Suppose your father’s there, great. If not, I wouldn’t be surprised if we pick up a tail on the way home. Which is why I think you should stay here with Stacey, Keira,” James adds.

Oh, shit.

Her eyes swing to me, but if she has a problem with this idea, she needs to say something. I’d be happy to leave her here, where I know shit isn’t going to go sideways. But there’s no way in hell my girl isn’t going to park her ass right in the middle of all the action.

“Listen here, you can boss my bestie around all you want, and I won’t even comment on it. But try to tell me where I can and can’t be, and we’ll have a serious problem, James. Trust me, you want me on your six more than this guy. I did teach him everything he knows.”

I cover my proud smile behind my hand as James stares Keira down. He’s worked with me for years, but my specialty has always been blades. Keira’s not lying. Her knowledge and skills with a firearm far outweighed mine before our trip to Colorado. I’d call us even now, but I don’t plan on telling her I think so.

“Fine. But when we get there, you will listen to me. Do you understand?”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Keira mocks back, saluting him with a lazy finger. “So, when do we go?”

“Tonight.”

SIXTEEN

KEIRA

Fallout - UNSECRET, Neoni

The guys spent the afternoon prepping for every contingency under the sun, while I hit the gym and took the longest shower known to man. We left Stacey at the house with Cinder and explicit instructions to leave if we weren't back by morning—another house in James's long list of options pre-programmed in the GPS for her.

The giant blacked-out SUV feels like a target board as we drive to our target. It doesn't matter that the glass is bulletproof, or that the undercarriage is covered in Kevlar; the air inside is thick with tension. The guys in the front seats add to the issue with their stark silence.

The possibility that if shit goes south, I'll be handed back over to Daddy Dearest has me running through the blueprints in my head one more time. We're entering at the back of the building, coming in through the old classroom wing that should be abandoned. From there, we'll be able to locate the entrance to the maintenance tunnels. But that's where it gets dicey.

My hands drift across my body, slowly taking stock of the weapons Harkin loaded me up with. My standard side carry, a backup strapped around my ankle, not to mention a few trusted blades scattered about. He double-checked that both of our trackers were emitting our location, which Stacey now also has access to, so she can

keep an eye on us.

“I’m parking a few blocks over. We’ll separate and meet at the entry point,” James instructs, speaking for the first time since we left.

“I’ll be fine,” I say when I notice Harkin’s shoulders tense at the word separate. “Remember, the city is my domain. You’re the interloper here,” I remind him with a little laugh to hopefully lighten his mood.

James pulls the SUV to a stop, turning to take us in. My skin prickles with nervous energy, but there’s also something else pulling deep in my gut. I think it might be excitement. But that’d be deranged, right?

“This is your last chance to stay here. I can get in and get out. You don’t need to come.”

I won’t dignify his statement with a response. Instead, I unbuckle without a word and hop out of the car. Shoving my hands in the hoodie’s pocket, I head across the street, not checking behind me to see if the guys are also on the move. I know where I’m going, and we should get off the street as soon as possible. When I step around the next street corner, the church comes into view. The old building looks misplaced among the high rises and storefronts with advertisement posters in their windows. Its large steeple glows, adding to the city’s light pollution. But it’s nice on nights like these when, even in the dead of night, you’re never truly in the dark.

The church butts up to what I thought would be an alleyway, but instead, it’s a garden oasis of shrubs and greenery lining the path I need to take to get to the side door. Pulling my hood down to block more of my face, I stalk forward, scanning between every bush and behind every tree. I don’t know what I think I’ll find, but if something’s hiding, I’ll be prepared.

Two dark figures join me at the door, and we don't say a word or make a sound as James tries to open the door and finds it locked. He's quick to pull something from his inside pocket. He pokes at the lock for a few seconds before it pushes open.

His finger rests against his lips, and then he's motioning for us to follow behind. I draw my Glock, holding it at my side in case I need to stash it quickly, should we come across a parishioner. The halls are coated in inky shadows. The only thing guiding our path is the red safety exit signs at the end of each hall. I know from the blueprints we have three halls to get down before we enter a cafeteria that houses the entrance we're looking for.

James halts outside its doors, peering through the thin vertical window. This is where his contact mentioned seeing someone. We discussed a plan if security was still here, but based on the relaxed set of James's shoulders, we don't need to worry. Our shoes squeak across the linoleum, and I notice the film of dust across the tables, still laid out as if the school never expected to be shut down.

Pausing at the maintenance tunnel entrance, James glances back one last time. Harkin and I both nod, ready to rush into a possible ambush. Descending into the tunnels is like stepping into a void where the dank smells of standing water and stale air choke my lungs. The place is undoubtedly crawling with all sorts of vermin and deadly mold.

The cement floors dampen our footsteps as we approach the first turn. We're lucky the tunnels don't fork and seem to only run directly under the church itself. I expected to have already run into one of Domenico's men, but there's nothing but the pitter-patter of tiny scurrying feet. The only door we've come across looms a few yards ahead. There's no guard, no light peeking through underneath, no grunts or moans of pain. It's silent. And silence kills.

James stops, fist held up to signal the same from us. They might have agreed to let

me come along, but I'm under strict orders to be last and stay close. There may have also been some threats about my recklessness, but sometimes, it's warranted when the situation calls for it.

There's nothing here. The room is empty, apart from a metal chair and chains hanging from the ceiling in the middle. I look at Harkin as he takes in the space. I wonder if this is what the video showed. He refused to show it to me, saying nothing would be gained from me watching what happened.

The guys lap the room while I wait by the door, keeping an eye down the corridor in case we were followed.

"I've got something," Harkin whisper-shouts, bringing whatever he found back over for me to look at.

"Yeah, I've got something too," James adds, but he doesn't sound as enthused about his finding.

I keep one booted foot propped against the door, keeping the hall in my line of sight. Harkin makes it to me first with an older cheap flip phone in his palm, the small front screen still displaying the time.

That wasn't left here on accident.

"And you?" I ask James as he reaches us.

He holds out a closed-up bandana, slowly peeling back one of the edges.

"Jesus fucking Christ, that's a finger." The edge is crusted with dried blood. But the finger itself has lost all color. It's been here a minute.

“How astute of you,” James answers, his tone drenched in sarcasm.

I throw him an annoyed look before asking, “Do you think it’s your father’s?”

“If I had to guess, probably. I don’t see why there’d be someone else’s finger lying in wait for us when they knew we’d eventually show up. But I still think we should have it printed. James, you got that?”

“Yeah, I’ll handle it. What about?—”

A phone chime going off echoes deafeningly in the quiet cement room. The guys stare at it, pondering what to do next. I take the lead, reaching out and snatching the cell from Harkin’s still outstretched hand before flipping it open to bring it up to my ear. We hold a collective breath. I don’t offer a greeting, but the person on the other line doesn’t need the opportunity.

“Hello, my beautiful daughter. Lovely to see you’re back from your little escape to the Rockies.”

I point to my eyes and twirl my index finger around the room, letting the guys know we’re being watched. James turns on his heels, scanning for the device.

“It is home, after all. I couldn’t stay away too long,” I answer.

Harkin taps his ear like he wants to listen, but it’s been years since I’ve used a flip phone. Do they even have a speaker function? I shrug and wait for Domenico to respond. The phone is ripped out of my hand, Harkin’s finger pushing unnecessarily hard against a button in a demonstration before the voice I’ve come to despise fills the space between us.

“I was disappointed by your actions last year, Keira. I expected you to stick around

for your sister.”

“Sounds like your expectations were a tad delusional. I don’t owe Alina anything, and as for her daughter, I still plan on helping her, but that doesn’t have anything to do with you. So, why don’t you tell me what you really want from me, Domenico? We both know it’s not about a big family reunion. You wouldn’t have kidnapped me or sent your men after me a second time if that were the case.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, mio cuore,” he chastises.

“Drop the shit. You know where we are. What do you want?”

“A meeting. I have a proposition for you. Bring your keeper and bodyguard. It’ll be a friendly conversation.”

“Where?” Harkin cuts in.

“Oh look, there he is. Your father says hello, by the way. I was disappointed it took you so long to make a move.”

“He’s not my priority, Domenico. A wise man like yourself should have grasped that the first time we met. Now, when and where?”

“This Friday, eight o’clock at the Pendry. Don’t be late, or I’ll let my men take something a little more vital from Mr. Greyson. Maybe his head. At least, then he won’t have to face his charges.”

The phone clicks off before either of us can respond to his threats.

“Not exactly the trap we were expecting,” I say on an exhale.

“Let’s get out of here.” Harkin turns off the phone and pockets it.

I’m sure he’s interested in seeing if there’s any information he can pull from it, but Domenico’s too smart to leave something so obvious. The three of us leave the same way we came. James tells us to split up again and meet back up at the SUV, but Harkin doesn’t leave my side. I get it. He’s on edge after that last little bit. I would be, too, if I still had a parent to care about.

The ride back to the house takes twice as long as it should, with James taking every backward route he can think of. My eyes are heavy, drooping as sleep tries to steal me away while the tires on the pavement try to lull me into a zoned-out state. Everyone’s been quiet, processing, and no doubt wondering what this magical proposal from Domenico might be.

His meeting at a public bar is likely his idea of a show of good faith. However, I wouldn’t put it past him to rent the entire space and fill it with people who work for him just to give himself an edge if it doesn’t go his way.

My mind harps on all those possibilities. Everything from Harkin taking over for his father in whatever capacity to drug running or guns. Then again, maybe I’ve watched one too many mafia movies over the years, and things aren’t like that.

Resting my head against the back window, I finally give in and let my eyes fall closed. Unfortunately, I’m not met with the sweet oblivion sleep typically brings. No, my thoughts still race a mile a minute. Just as I heave a sigh of frustration and wrench my eyes back open, the house comes into view. Thank God . We can debrief, and I can take a scalding shower to wash away the day before collapsing into bed.

SEVENTEEN

HARKIN

The World We Made - Ruelle

The week passed slowly, like we were swimming through a world of molasses. The finger came back positive for my father's prints. I wouldn't be surprised if by the time we get around to finally seeing him again—if we see him again—he's down a whole handful. The phone was a dead end, just as I'd expected, but I was hoping maybe they were too cocky and missed something I could have used.

A punch comes out of nowhere, the pain radiating through my jaw. Okay, maybe not nowhere. My focus isn't on the match and James is taking full advantage of it. But his assault draws me out of my head. I lose my footing, but I'm back at him with a drive straight for his ribs.

"It's about damn time you stop dancing around," he chides.

"Fuck off, there's too much shit going on."

"Yeah, which is exactly why you needed this."

He jolts out with a kick, trying to catch me off guard, but I call it the moment his weight shifts to his standing leg. Instead of landing another blow, I catch it, using his momentum to take us to the ground and me into a position to win this match. He taps out with my forearm against his throat in a chokehold. I relax and let go, splaying out

on the mat as his agile body rebounds from the ground. Moments later, a towel hits my face, and James's shadow looms over me.

"You can't take the meeting if you're going to be in your head the entire time."

"It won't be like that when I'm there."

"Better not. There's too much riding on this."

"You don't think I know that?" I bite back, finally getting up from the floor to talk face-to-face.

"You're about to be thrust into a world you've only glimpsed. It's not pretty, and it's not fair. These guys play dirty and are only out to benefit their own interest, even where their blood is concerned."

"Trust me, I'm not giving him the benefit of the doubt. Domenico has something up his sleeve, and there's no way in hell it doesn't involve Keira in some major way. Thankfully, she wants fuck all to do with him. But it's better to know than to leave it hanging like a noose over our heads."

"Harkin!" Keira yells from somewhere upstairs.

James and I take off, our conversation forgotten. Our feet pound up the stairs like charging bulls after a red flag. I halt suddenly at the end of the hall when the living room comes into view. James barrels around me, never being taken off guard for a moment.

"Who are you? How did you get in?"

"I let her in." Keira looks over her shoulder at the both of us.

Her voice snaps me out of my moment of shock. “James, this is Nikita. Nikita, James,” I say, passing his stalled frame to join Keira on the small leather couch. “You know, when I gave you my card, I expected you to reach out digitally, not drop by unexpectedly.”

“What’s all the yelling about?” Stacey asks, stepping off the last stair next to James.

Nikita lets out a loud whistle, staring down Keira’s best friend in her best replica of a 1930s window maker outfit, marabou robe included. “And who is this beautiful angel?”

Stacey steps closer to James’s side, still unsure of the situation. I don’t blame him for the possessive arm he tucks around her back, displaying his hand across her hip. But it must surprise Stacey, because her eyes fling up to his, shock evident in their wide gaze. Keira and I try to hide our amusement, but we share a look that speaks volumes. I pity the two of them, trying so desperately to hide whatever is happening between them.

Breaking Nikita’s line of thought, I ask, “How’d you find us?”

“What, you think you made it hard?”

“Nik, come on. Tell us why you’re here,” Keira placates, nudging an elbow into my rib at the same time.

“I found something.” She pulls out a drive from her jacket pocket, chucking it across the table at me. “Your family’s fucked up on both sides of the tree.”

“Great,” Keira mutters under her breath. “How bad is it?”

“Depends. What would you consider worse, flooding the streets with shit drugs or

running guns through the port and spreading them throughout the country, even up into Canada? Maybe it's not so bad you ended up away from your family all these years. If I were you, I'd keep it that way."

"If only it were that simple," Keira adds.

"Do your contacts know anything about this?"

"Trust me, they don't know what I don't tell them. And this didn't seem like a need-to-know situation, unless?"

"No, we're not going there. It's enough of a mess without including a bunch of blowhards with enough red tape to keep this from being squashed quickly."

"My thoughts exactly. Everything's on that drive. Including where you can find your mom's side of your family if you're looking to go down that road," Nikita says while standing from the couch. "See you around, K. You know where to find me." And then she's gone, heading out the front door like a summer storm that blows in unexpected and unwanted.

"And the punches just keep on coming," Keira blows out as she sags against my side.

"This is what we were looking for, sweetness. We assumed they were both into some bad shit, but it gives us something to play off. Let me dig through the drive and see what I can piece together. There might be something to give us the upper hand for tomorrow's meeting."

"Us."

My eyebrows draw up in confusion. "Us, what?"

“We’re both going to look through that drive, Harkin. I want to see what she found about my mom’s side of the family.”

“Is no one going to tell me who that girl was?” Stacey breaks into the conversation.

“That was Keira’s ex,” I tell her pointedly, never dropping my eyes from Keira’s annoyed ones. But it’s the eye roll I was expecting that pulls a tight grin to my face.

She shoves me away playfully, peeling her warm body from my side and off the couch. “Let’s get into it. We’ve got less than twenty-four hours to find anything that might tell us what Domenico is planning tomorrow night.”

The elevator dings upon its arrival on the ground floor. Keira steps forward, the sky-high heels on her feet making her toned legs a distraction under the silk dress draped on her body. When she came out of the bedroom earlier, we almost didn’t make it out of the house. I wanted to wrap her long, curly hair up in my hand and bend her over the living room sofa. The only thing that saved us from being late for this meeting was the other two people waiting for us to leave.

Following in after her, I select the fourth-floor button. James and Stacey will be joining us, but the plan is to arrive separately so they can keep an eye on the surroundings. James called in some backup to give us better numbers should something go down.

I fall in beside Keira as the elevator fills with other hotel guests. It doesn’t go unnoticed how many looks my girl gets. It only serves as a reminder that the small jewelry box is burning a hole in my jacket pocket. With everything going on, not to mention sharing a house with two other people, I haven’t had the right opportunity to make the special moment happen.

My fingers trace up and down her spine, gliding against the thin fabric. Leaning in,

my lips meet the soft spot below her ear. Her intoxicating scent fills my inhale as her body melds perfectly into mine, two halves of a whole once again reunited.

“Have I told you how much I want to rip this dress from your body,” I growl in her ear. Just the thought of having her writhing under me is enough to have my cock hardening. It’s not exactly the best time to be dealing with a chub.

“Then I probably shouldn’t tell you the only thing I have on under this dress is long, steel, and pointed,” she teases as the elevator dings our arrival on the fourth floor.

I groan inwardly, resituating myself and thinking about every unhappy, disgusting thing my mind can conjure as I follow the wicked temptress out into the hall.

“Just the two of you?” the woman at the doors to the bar asks before letting us in.

“Yes, we’re meeting a Mr. Morelli. Has he arrived yet?”

Her demeanor quickly changes from one of disinterest to one of uncomfortable fear. Domenico must have his hands in the pie here if she’s aware enough of who he is to be concerned.

“Of course. Let me show you back to his table. He should be arriving shortly.”

The small space is shockingly intimate, with candles and a fireplace providing a warm glow in the otherwise dimly lit room. Small tables fit like sardines through the middle, while the gold leaf-decorated walls are lined with single-sided booths. The host leads us to the back, where the bar looks out over the crowd, already enjoying the overpriced drinks and food small enough to feed an infant.

She doesn’t stop when the room ends. Instead, her hand runs across the rich art deco-inspired wallpaper, pushing slightly before it pops out enough for her to grab the edge

of a hidden door. I quickly step in front of Keira, placing her behind me and out of the way of whatever we're about to walk into. Her harrumph of irritation hits my ears in passing.

"Just follow me. The room is up here to your left."

If I thought the bar was dark, this hallway rivals the entrance tunnel to a movie theater. The only lighting is thin strips along the floor. I drop my hand back, linking my fingers with Keira's just in time to step through the open door.

"He'll be with you shortly." And then she's gone, disappearing into the dark hallway, the door we just came through closing behind her.

"That was weird, right?" Keira asks, looking around the room.

"Yeah, she knows something."

"I don't like that we're separated from the main room."

"I expected it. We're good," I assure her, letting my fingers gingerly slip against the tracker inside her arm.

The door opens again before she can say anything else. Two bulky men in fitted black suits walk through, followed moments later by Domenico and Alina. His muscle makes their way in our direction, motioning for us to raise our hands and widen our feet like they're planning to pat us down for weapons. Before they can get within five feet of Keira, my hand moves to my holster, freeing my gun.

The click of the safety stalls their movements as they make to reach for their own. "Put your filthy hands on what's mine, and this meeting's over."

Alina's presence here is already grating on my nerves as her indignant scoff reaches my ears. On the other hand, Keira looks like the cat that caught the canary as she stares down the man twice her size, daring him to try me. I see her fingers at her side out of the corner of my eye. She wouldn't have let him touch her anyway. That knife at her fingertips is just as dangerous as the gun pointed at his head.

"Now, now. I said this was a friendly meeting. There's no need for all the theatrics. We're all family here. You two can watch the door," Domenico orders.

The two meatheads look irritated that their master pulled their stings back on duty. One slips through the door, closing it behind him, while the other posts up right in front of it.

A clash of hands clapping draws my attention back to the man putting me on edge. He motions for the two empty leather barrel chairs across from where he and Alina sit. Instead of holstering my gun, I sit with it perched on my knee in Domenico's direction. Keira joins me, resting against the arm, looking more bored than worried about what's to come.

"You got us here. Now, don't waste my time," Keira spits, ever the force of nature.

EIGHTEEN

KEIRA

YES MOM - Tessa Violet

I refuse to let her presence get to me. She's nothing. No one. Yet, an annoying little bee buzzes around my head, trying to tell me otherwise. That was until Harkin made it extremely fucking clear I was his. She wasn't too happy about it. But I was brimming with pompous energy now, and it was bleeding into my first words to Domenico.

He studies me. Not with the eyes of a father seeing his daughter for the first time in months, worried about her wellbeing. No, this man is gauging my ability to handle this interaction. Well, two can play that game. You didn't survive living on the streets, bouncing from one unstable and unsafe situation to another without learning how to read the slightest tell someone's trying not to give off.

I don't follow up on my request; instead, I let it lie between us. Alina's look of disinterest while studying her cuticles tells me she's nothing more than a true pawn for Domenico to move about his little chessboard. I should feel bad for her, but there wasn't an inch in my heart that gave a damn.

"I commend your directness, Keira. Why don't we get down to it."

I motion for him to continue, waiting to see if he'll play his cards or create another maze of nonsense for us to dig through.

“I want you to join the family.”

“Pass. I’m not interested in having anything to do with you or what you seem to think is a family endeavor. You made sure of that the first and last time we met.”

“I think we got started on the wrong foot. I can see that now.”

“You think? Kidnapping doesn’t really instill much trust in a budding father-daughter relationship.”

“Understandable, but hear me out. I think you’ll want to stick around this time.”

“Really, and why’s that?”

Domenico reaches into his jacket pocket. Harkin tenses next to me, his trigger finger sliding into place and asserting the slightest bit of pressure. He doesn’t relax when Domenico pulls out a small piece of paper. But then he flips it right side up, pushing it across the glass table with stiff fingers.

It’s an old photo, crinkled and torn at the edges, with a yellow tint. When my fingers snag it from the table and bring it into view, I lose the oxygen filling my lungs. She’s beautiful, and her vintage ensemble is something I’ve only seen in movies. That’s not the piece that shocks me. We’re almost identical, and it’s as if my twin status has been bumped to one of three.

“Who—who is this?” I stumble out.

“Your namesake.”

“Wait. On Mom’s side?”

“Keira isn’t exactly an Italian name.”

I do my best not to lose my shit at his condescending tone. “Okay, but who is she? Our grandmother?”

“Close, your great-grandmother.”

I take in the small details of the photo. How our noses slant at the same angle or the way our foreheads share the same deep crease. “Thanks for the family ancestry lesson, but I don’t see how you think this will sway me into the fold.”

“Keira Fitzpatrick has a nice ring to it. But Donahue is your mother’s real surname. Though you technically should be a Morelli.”

“I, technically, don’t give a shit. And to be quite honest with you, I’m glad Mom picked something all her own. It breaks my connection to both of you.”

“See, I told you she wouldn’t care. Selfish as ever,” Alina adds for the first time since she walked into the room.

My body lurches forward, hands slapping against the glass table. The noise grabs her attention, and her eyes widen. “Don’t fucking act like you know me, princess. But I sure as hell know you, and if you want to point fingers at who’d be the selfish one, it sure as shit isn’t me.”

Harkin’s warm hand wraps around the front of my bare thigh, squeezing to draw me back to center. The point of this meeting is losing traction. Was there once a time when I wanted nothing more than to be the little girl with a big, happy family? Sure. But that little girl is long gone. I’d rather never hear a word from these people again than have to jump through hoops to earn the affection of a stranger. Shit, at this point, I’d rather go back to my boring life of stalking Harkin online and working at the

airline.

I settle back on the chair as my point strikes home. She knows, I know, exactly how she used to be with Harkin. Not to mention everything I learned from watching her life through the scope of the lens she aimed at herself.

“What about my father?” Harkin sidesteps the current sisterly vendetta.

“Your father owes me a lot of money, Mr. Greyson. Most men in his predicament aren’t offered options.”

“So, he’s still alive?” I throw it out because I’m nosey, and I’m sure Harkin wants to know, but won’t ask.

“For now, but it won’t be that way much longer.”

“If it’s your missing money you want, I can get it for you. Just hand over the account you want it wired to. We can handle this right here and now. No need to drag it out.”

“That won’t be necessary. Plus, that brings me to my proposition for you both. Grant me a single favor, and I’ll release the elder Greyson with no more harm done to him.”

“A favor?” I ask, a tone of incredulous amusement leaking through. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“It won’t even require you to dirty your hands, and who knows, you may even enjoy it,” Domenico adds, dancing around the exact offer.

My eyes drift quickly to Harkin’s relaxed form in the chair. It doesn’t match the energy billowing off him. He’s anxious to hear what’s on the table. I don’t put anything past Domenico with the hand he holds over us. But I know Harkin’s limits

are a lot more cut and dry than mine have always been.

“Out with it. We don’t have all day,” I snark, irritated and ready to leave.

“Join me for a meeting with your grandfather. He’s eager to meet his granddaughters.”

My mouth runs dry like thick cotton trapped on the roof of my mouth after a night of drinking one too many. Ironically, I’d do about anything for a swig of something neat right now.

“My grandfather,” I repeat like a mockingbird balanced on an overhanging tree limb. “He knows about us?” It’s like I’m reliving the realization that my father knew where I was for over a year, yet did nothing to join my life sanely.

“I’ve approached him with the unexpected news, and he would like to meet you both as soon as possible if you agree.”

Three sets of eyes burn against my exposed skin. The expectation to decide at the drop of a hat holds me hostage, which doesn’t bode well for any of us.

Clearing my throat, I stand and drop the photo back on the table. “I’ll think about it and let you know.”

Dom’s fury gets the best of his otherwise collected demeanor as he shoots to his feet, closing the space separating us. I feel Harkin do the same, ready to intervene should the moment call for it.

“Listen here.” He leans closer, his hot breath fanning across my cheeks. “You have the power to make sure your little dog here doesn’t have to run to Mommy and tell her the news about her husband. I’m not a generous man, Keira. Take it or leave it.

But if you walk out that door, that man's blood is on your hands, mio cuore. And maybe we aren't so different after all."

Harkin doesn't cut in. He doesn't try to fight the battle of wills before me. Instead, his strong presence gives me the strength to throw out an answer I might later regret. "Set the meeting," I spit out and shove past Domenico, even though the opposite direction is free.

His man on the door doesn't move from his post. The silk of my dress pushes away as I slip my fingers along the hilt of my knife. His eyes dance from my short frame to his boss behind me. He moves to the side just in time to avoid a deep gut wound.

I follow the thin lights in the darkness to the hidden door and pop out back into the busy bar. Eyes swing in our direction as we enter from seemingly nowhere. My favorite blonde beauty is talking up a man in an expensive suit while her captor watches on from three tables down. They both stand abruptly when they see us and join in our exodus.

Quietness falls around us as we enter the elevator and descend four stories to the lobby. A restless energy radiates off Stacey. She wants to dive into what happened to us behind closed doors, but she's holding it in. I'm sure James whispering in her ear is helping if her eyes are any indicator.

We wait for the valet to bring the SUV around before we load in. There's a collective sigh of relief as we pull away from the hotel. James and Harkin keep their eyes peeled for the potential of a tail, but I let my head dip against the seat back and close my eyes. Why couldn't my family be average? A couple hard working, nine to fivers. No, instead, I get the bottom of the barrel. A family legacy that leaves much to be desired, even from someone who's done her share of shady shit throughout the years. But I can't deny the nagging curiosity to meet this person who might offer another connection to the only family I ever knew.

Whispers draw me out of my head. Since Nikita found us, the guys have been antsy about our location, so they decided to move again. I'm starting to feel like I'm back to being a teen, couch-hopping every few days for a roof over my head. I miss the stability of my apartment and the safety it offered. But those days seem to be long gone.

"Where'd you settle on?" I ask no one in particular.

"Home."

"What?" I sit forward, peeking between the two front seats.

"There's no point in hiding anymore. Domenico thinks he's gotten exactly what he wants."

"Hasn't he?"

"Oh, sweetness, if there's one thing that meeting did, it was give us the upper hand. He wants a meeting. We know the who, and thanks to Nikita's dossier, I might know the where."

"We're going to cut him off at the knees?"

"Domenico is never going to be an ally in our corner. But your grandfather, you both have something in common."

"Mom," I say in the softest whisper.

Stacey's warm hand runs up and down my back, and the comforting touch is much appreciated.

“Exactly, I can’t imagine, even after all these years, his feelings toward the Morelli family have grown warmer,” Harkin confirms my suspicions.

“The feud was there long before your parents were ever born. Since they immigrated to New York from their home countries, the families have been at war. The city’s only so big, and everyone wanted a piece of the pie. The animosity only heightened when a beloved daughter was gunned down by the mafia don himself,” James adds to the conversation, like a historian finally able to share their knowledge.

“Digging his own grave, but for what?” I ask.

“That’s the only thing still up in the air. Let’s finish this upstairs.”

The parking garage for Harkin’s apartment comes into view. It’s surreal coming back to this place after all these months—the four of us a unit of sorts.

The three people in this car are the only people in the world who know everything and don’t run for safety. During the absolute chaos my life’s become, where the fantasy I’d built in my head collided head-on with a morbid reality, I found my own family. We’re bound by loyal friendship, secrets, and a moral compass that doesn’t always point north. And I wouldn’t want it any other way.

NINETEEN

HARKIN

Keep it Down - Migrant Motel

The apartment was stuffy, and somehow, a thin layer of dust had taken over every surface in less than six months. I regretted not hiring someone to clean while we were away and air the space out, but the thought never crossed my mind.

It felt amazing to fall into bed, my bed, with Keira in my arms. She'd fallen asleep in the bath against my chest as we discussed what Domenico could want with a rival family. It could be anything from gun running to joining together to take over another syndicate's territory. What he planned to do wasn't what had me worried. It was his banking on Keira being enough of an incentive for her grandfather to agree to his harebrained scheme.

Her bare breasts follow the rhythm of her deep, slumbering breaths. I let my fingers trace their swell. Shadows dance across her skin as the lamplight from the street trickles in through the exposed window. She doesn't stir as I pull the blanket back, revealing her entire nakedness to my eager eyes. It doesn't matter how many times, in how many ways, I've seen her like this—my mouth still waters for a taste.

My cock grows hard against her leg, casually hiked up over my side. I should let her sleep. She looks so peaceful. More so than I've seen in the last couple of weeks. But when my fingers run over her ass and her hips rock into me in her sleep, I can't resist.

Slowly disentangling myself, I let her roll slowly onto her back. She arches and tucks her hands behind her head under the pillow. The shift puts her on full display. I tamp down the groan, building thick in my throat.

Crawling carefully up from the foot of the bed between her legs, I shove them gently, a little wider, until I can shift them over my shoulders. A soft whimper steals my attention from the treasure inches from my face, and I pause to see if she's caught on to my middle-of-the-night worshipping. Her eyes are still shielded behind thick lashes. Her breaths flow evenly.

I lean forward, dragging the slightest touch of my tongue up her sleep-warmed slit. When I circle her clit for the third time, her thighs push harder against my shoulders.

"Harkin?" her raspy, sleepy voice asks in confusion.

I take the opportunity her wakefulness affords me to wrap my arms around her thighs, holding her tightly in place as I feast on her needy cunt. She grows more sensitive with every lashing against her swollen bud. Her moans fill the quiet night of our room as she gains full consciousness, leaving her dreams behind for a fantasy-driven reality.

"Fuck, slow down," she begs breathlessly.

I chuckle, lapping at her entrance, which grows wetter by the second. Her taste is tangy on my tongue as I spear into her, fucking her as deep as I can.

"Harkin. Fuck. Please." Her volume builds with each plea.

I pull back, and a full smile draws across my face as I take in the glazed-over bliss encroaching on her observation. She's on the edge and ready to fall apart. Her hips buck toward me, and I chuckle.

“Eager little thing,” I taunt, blowing up her glistening slit.

She groans at the new sensation, and the sound shoots straight to my throbbing cock against the mattress. I shift my hips, trying to find an ounce of relief, but I’m more than ready to sink into her tight cunt and find my release deep inside her.

That desperation has me burying my face back between her thighs. My fingers tighten, squeezing the soft, supple flesh of her inner thighs as an anchor. She’ll wear my marks there tomorrow. Pressed firmly against her, my lungs ache as my oxygen flow is restricted. But I can feel her quivering against me.

“I’m going to—Harkin!” She screams my name as the orgasm crashes through her body.

I don’t let up, extending the pleasure until she’s a twitching, whimpering mess, desperately trying to squeeze my head to get me away from her.

When she props herself up on her hands and pulls her hips away from me, I finally relent and let go, licking her cum from my lips.

Her back hits the headboard with a thud, and her chest heaves as she tries to suck in a lung full to steady herself. My fingers wrap around her ankles, resting next to my knees, and I pull hard and quick. She’s back, flat against the mattress under me, perfect for ravaging.

“You’re not going anywhere. We’re not done yet.”

My lips slam against hers. Our teeth clash as she opens for me and sucks my tongue down. I groan, and she swallows that down, too. I’m so hard and close that the tip of my hips could have me sinking into her. But I pull back against my better judgment.

“Don’t move,” I command.

She stills, watching me shift off the mattress, squatting down behind the chest at the end of the bed. I tilt open the lid and dig through the different leather, metal, and silicone until I find what I want.

I extend the metal until it clicks into place, the double cuffs on each end clinking against each other as they dangle in the air. Her eyes grow wide with its appearance.

“Talk to me, little one.”

“Green,” she says, a smile lighting up her eager face.

“Roll over. Face down, ass up.”

I drop the bar against her calves, and it slides to the crease of her knee. She’s so beautifully on display, and my palm itches to redden her taut skin. I let them wander, smoothing over the globes of her ass and up the tattooed arch of her back. One hand tangles in the messy locks of long dark hair, pulling taut to distract her just long enough that her eyes look over her shoulder to lock with mine.

My free hand drops forcefully, the crack of skin on the skin breaking the silence between us. Her jaw tightens as she adjusts to the sting, but doesn’t let a peep go.

That just won’t do.

Pulling her head back further, I twist and angle to slap a bit harder on the other cheek. This time, she drags in a pained gulp. The third time my stinging hand hits her flesh on the inside of her thigh, I get what I want.

Her scream breaks free beautifully, echoing off the walls.

“You sing so pretty for me, sweetness. Do you think our guests like your song?”

She quiets and stills, realization dawning on her face that James and Stacey are a mere hallway away. They might be asleep and oblivious, or they might be tuning in to a lot more.

She stirs when one of the cuffs tightens against her ankle, but the opposite's too close to reach the bar's edge. I shove against her lower back, slipping her hips wider and exposing more of that dripping cunt.

She's half locked in when I instruct, “Arms back, grab your ankles for me.” It's not a comfortable position, but that's not the point. The point is that she's utterly exposed and open to me with nowhere to go. My favorite.

“Fuck, you're exquisite on display like this, little one.”

“Please,” she whines.

Her back arches and retracts, tilting her hips in desperation.

“Please, what?”

“Please, fuck my pussy.”

I hum in interest, running my fingers along her slit to her entrance. I know she's ready for me when I push into her warmth without resistance. Slipping my finger in my mouth to clean it of her juices breaks the last thread of control. Teasing her is my own masochistic torture.

Notching my cock, my free hand grips the soft curve of her hip crease before I impale her in one hard thrust. It's too much. The way her heat grips every inch, and her moan

drawls out. I don't let her adjust. My pace keeps a ruining speed that sends my balls slapping against her clit.

"This pussy was made for me, little one. You were made for me."

"Yes," she cries.

I won't last. Not when she feels like a perfectly warm summer day. My spine tingles, the telltale sign I've got seconds to make her fall apart before I do. She's almost entirely flat against the mattress, but I slide my hand between, finding her clit swollen and sensitive.

Bent like this, her murmured mumblings of nonsense reach my ears and spur me on. My hips rotate and drag slowly as I let my fingers finish the show.

"Come for me," I whisper directly into her ear, my breath fluttering against her wild hair.

She shatters, her screams no doubt pulling our house guests from a dead sleep. Shit, the people in the next apartment over can probably hear the echoes of her pleasure. I push past her contracting inner walls till I'm buried deep. The damn breaks washing the pins and needles away from my skin and directing them all to the base of my cock as I pump through it, emptying every drop into her.

We lie there in a heaping mess of stickiness and intertwined limbs. The high dwindles, and my breath calms. I kiss the side of her head, and she sighs softly, still wrapped in the afterglow.

"My perfect little whore," I praise, watching her cheek pull up in a proud smile.

Pulling out, I watch my cum drip from her swollen cunt. The first thing that comes to

mind is reaching for a plug to shove back in and stop any more from escaping. The desire to fill her full of my seed strikes again. She'd kill me if she knew I couldn't wait for the day to pump her full, raise her hips, and stay seated until the time ran out. But today's not the day.

My fingers quickly pull open the cuffs and move the bar out of her way. Reaching out, I grip her hips, slowly extending her legs out and massaging her hips to release the tension from holding her bent-over position for so long. She exhales a satisfied sigh as my nimble fingers work down her leg to her ankle, rubbing the spot the cuff gripped before doing the same on the other side.

She's stopped responding, her eyes closed, and her breathing has shifted back to even. She's fallen asleep quickly, like I never interrupted her slumber to begin with. My body's satiated, but my mind still runs at full speed. I clean her off and tuck her back in before showering. Throwing on a pair of sweats and a shirt, I close the door quietly behind me and make for my office at the back of the apartment.

I swing open the door and take in the space. I haven't been in here since we returned, and it feels oddly nostalgic. I've missed my setup. Working through files and files of information on my laptop just isn't the same. My fingers trace along the multi-monitor monstrosity waiting to be powered up.

Nikita gave us a start to where we might find Keira's grandfather, so I'll start there with my digging since my brain won't shut off. My fingers speed over the keys, clacking loudly against the quiet of the witching hour. I'm in work mode, eyes focused, bouncing left and right as I sift through extensive real estate records.

I'm unsure how long I've been at it when the door latching closed pulls my eyes away. "Couldn't sleep?" I ask James as he drops into one of the chairs facing my desk.

“Kind of hard to sleep when you decide to make your own porno across the hallway.”

There’s no trace of apology in my voice when I follow up and ask, “Stacey, sleep through it?”

He doesn’t answer, but his eyes tell me everything I need. It forces a small smile from me.

“Well, since you’re here anyway, look at this.” I nod to the screen, partially blocking our view. He joins me and looks over the information spread across the screens.

He lets out a low whistle as his eyes finally land on the small photo I found. “Are you going to tell her?”

“If I do, you know she’ll run into the fire headfirst, no regrets. But, if I don’t?—”

“She’ll never forgive you.” He confirms what I already know.

“Yeah. I just wish I knew exactly what we were dealing with here. What if it’s not what it looks like?”

“There’s only one way to find out, and we need to figure it out before Domenico knows because if he pieces this together, he could use it to his advantage,” he warns.

“That’s assuming he doesn’t already. But I think you’re right. He would have used it at the meeting to pull her in if he did. Do you think you can send your guy to surveillance the area? See if he can get proof I can bring to her instead of relying on this grainy picture.”

James looks down at his watch, and I realize I’m still up at three am. “I’ll call him in the morning, but I don’t see why not. He’s the best for this type of stuff.”

“Thanks, man.” I shoot the image off to James so he can send it to his guy and close everything.

“What a fucking shitshow,” James blows out.

“Tell me about it.” I push back from the desk and start for the door, James on my heels. “You know what we need?”

“A one-way ticket to somewhere far away.”

“Close. A trip to The Red Door.”

TWENTY

KEIRA

Bad Things - Summer Kennedy

The bass bumps through the speakers hidden in the corners of the bathroom. Stacey loses focus, hissing as the curling iron slips and burns her scalp. I laugh at her misfortune and sip on the weak vodka soda Harkin brought me when we started getting ready for the club.

I swing my legs, bouncing them off the vanity cabinets, while Stacey finishes up her hair. I've been done for a half hour, going for a sleek high pony and minimal makeup with sharp eyeliner. It looks flawless, with the black pleated skirt and sheer long sleeve with my leather harness fastened over. Metal chains hang from the leather and lead up to a collar Harkin tightened and locked, perfect for tonight.

"Are you sure this is a good idea with everything going on?" Stacey asks, between applying the bubblegum sheen to her top and bottom lips.

"I don't think we're likely to run into my father at the club." I recoil in disgust at the thought, knowing damn well what I'm likely getting into tonight. "Plus, we need this. I need this. A night to give up all my worries about what's going on and just let go."

Knuckles rap quickly against the doorjamb of the bathroom. "You ladies ready?" Harkin asks, leaning against the door. His eyes devour me, head to toe, but they darken just a little extra when he catches sight of the collar again.

I hop down, the soles of my boots thudding at the contact. “I am,” I confirm, walking in his direction. He holds his hand out to me, and I expect him to pull me in for a kiss. Instead, I’m twirled around, my skirt lifting from the motion, exposing the very thin G-string, leaving little to the imagination.

His large hand comes out of nowhere, meeting my skin with a harsh slap against my ass. “Mm, there will be no bending over for you tonight, sweetness. Let’s keep tonight death-free if we can, huh?” he whispers.

Stacey passes, eyeing us before yelling over her shoulder, “Let’s go, lovebirds.”

She’s already had a few drinks, pulling a flask from her makeup bag when we set out to get ready. When I eyed her suspiciously, she just mumbled something about “him being so controlling.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the irony as I sipped the weakest drink to have ever been served.

“You heard her. Let’s go.” His hand rests against the back of my neck. One thick finger hooked into the leather there. “I can’t wait to show you off.”

Heady desire in his tone sends shivers down my spine and a zing of excitement to my core. It makes walking to the SUV extremely difficult as I try to quell the growing throb with each step.

The drive was quick; we could have walked, but Harkin and James shot down the idea as soon as it left my lips. “Not worth the risk” and “We’ll be back late” were their reasons, and it wasn’t worth the fight. Plus, Stacey’s shoes didn’t exactly scream walk five blocks.

It’s a members-only night, and flashbacks of the last time Harkin and I were here flicker through my mind. The way that night ended was a catalyst within our relationship. The tunneled entrance is pitch black, the only guidance coming from the

neon red lighting that lines everything in the club just ahead.

My fingers lace with Stacey's as the guys lead in front of us. The music switches, and another sultry song I don't know with a dirty bass fills the air. It grips my body and makes me sway my hips a little more with every step we take.

Making it to the end of the hall is like falling out the bottom of the rabbit hole into a wonderland. Everything is not as it seems; the red hue distorts every person standing around in the midst of conversations. Moans of pleasure and screams of pain ricochet off the rafters above, adding to the ambiance and expectations of the place.

We're led to one of the standing round tables downstairs. James leans into Stacey, whispering something in her ear before dropping a possessive kiss on her lips. My eyes bug out as I take them in. That's it. I can't stand not knowing what the hell is going on between them.

Harkin's fingers grip my chin, relocating my gaze to his. His eyebrows are raised, a knowing smile on his lips as I settle my reaction, and he laughs. "Drinks?"

"Yes, please."

He leaves me with my own searing kiss, and the moment his back is turned, I whip around to face my best friend.

"Okay, that's it. Out with it," I demand, leaning in closer to her so we can talk without having to shout over the music.

"Out with what?" she says, playing the dumb blonde. I know she's not.

"Stace."

“Keira,” she mocks back in the same tone.

“You and James. What’s going on there?”

Closing her eyes, she draws a deep breath in before opening them with an annoyed sigh. She can sigh all she wants; I’m still waiting with drawn-up eyebrows for her to break the unnecessary tension and come clean.

“We’re exploring some things,” she states vaguely.

I tilt my head and roll my hand, instructing her to expand.

Her eyes scan the floor, searching the direction James took off in before she leans in even closer to talk right into my ear. “So, you remember that guy that used to bounce here, Robbie?”

I nod but don’t respond. She can feel it and continues. “I kept seeing him after you left, except things took a turn after a few weeks. Where he used to be sweet and giving, he slowly became more controlling and rougher. Not in a good way.” A nervous laugh flutters between us. “One night, we met up, had dinner, and then took things to the bedroom. It—it got out of control.”

Pulling back, I stare into her eyes and she doesn’t have to say it. Anger floods my system, my nostrils flare, and I’m about to step away to go hunt him down when her fingers wrap tightly around my wrist, pulling me back in so she can continue.

“I went looking for you. I knew you weren’t there. But I don’t know, in my fucked-up haze, I still felt like maybe you were lying to me, and you’d be at the apartment anyways. But you weren’t there, James was. He flung the door open, took one look at me in all my glorious mess, and dragged me inside. I won’t bore you with all the details, but he took care of me that night and went after Robbie after he finally got his

name from me.”

That brings a smile to my lips. I’ve seen James in action. I can only imagine the look on Robbie’s face when he opened the door to find James instead of Stacey.

“The fucked-up thing is, when he got there, Robbie was already fucking some other chick. We’d agreed to be monogamous while seeing each other. It seems I was a bigger idiot than I’d thought when it came to him.”

“Oh, fuck no. You’re not an idiot. He’s the one that disrespected you and your relationship. He’s the one who put on a front and faked what it means to be a part of the community. That’s not on you, babe. That’s all him. He’s not here anymore, is he?”

“Oh god, no. James made sure I reported it to the club. They don’t take kindly to men like him in their midst, especially when they want to maintain a certain reputation. And extra, especially when you have connections.”

Two drinks slide our way across the table. Harkin and James make it back at the same time we’re done talking. I pick up my drink and take a tentative sip. When the flavors hit my tongue, I swing annoyed eyes in his direction.

“Not tonight. Drink up, then we’ll head upstairs.”

The club soda with lime bubbles up my nose as I drown my disappointment in not taking Stacey up on her earlier offer. He’s right, though. It’s better to have a clear head for what tonight will bring.

James leads Stacey away to the left at the top of the stairs. Don’t get me wrong, I love my best friend, but there are some limits even I have. Like watching her get railed by Harkin’s best friend and my ex-bodyguard. There’s no judgment here. I can

appreciate what he brings to her table, but it doesn't mean I want to watch it happen.

Harkin's fingers tighten against my waist, drawing me out of my head. He's stopped in front of a couple amid a Shibari demonstration. A small crowd circles them, watching the way they work together. It's beautiful. There's a calmness in the air around them, even though the music's bass is still loud enough to make it feel like we're in the middle of any dance club. He has the ropes wrapped around both her arms and legs, the knots in each adding to the complexity of the image.

"What do you think?" Harkin whispers in my ear.

I lean in closer to whisper even softer, not wanting to interrupt. "It looks like a lot of training and skill."

"They're one of the club's instructing couples. I know they offer private lessons if you're ever interested."

I watch a little longer, mesmerized, as he finishes the last pass of the rope through a small loop. I envision myself in her position. What it would feel like to be that restrained. The concept is nothing new to us, but getting out of something like that takes a lot more time and effort than releasing a few cuffs unless you're using safety scissors. I like to think I could handle it, but I worry something might spark inside and trigger a panic attack. I guess we won't know unless we try.

"Yeah, maybe," I answer sheepishly, knowing Harkin's picked up on it when he leads me further down the walkway.

"I had something else in mind for us tonight anyways," he says, pulling back the curtain to reveal the small space.

It's not like the last time we were here. There isn't a booth or the throne-like chair

Harkin had me bent over, taking his punishment in front of a captive audience. My pussy throbs at the memory, and I shift my thighs back and forth, trying to relieve a bit of the building tension.

This small room can't be bigger than ten by ten, though it looks like it goes on forever with its floor-to-ceiling mirrors bouncing reflections off each other. It has a similar effect to being in a house of mirrors without the horror and dread. Instead, excited nerves simmer low in my belly at the sight of the leather swing dangling from the ceiling in the middle of the space.

"Open or closed?" Harkin asks, hand wrapped around the black curtain separating us from the rest of the club.

I don't have to think about it; the words slip from my lips naturally, as if they're for a well-rehearsed play. "Whatever pleases you, Sir."

He waits a beat, looking me over with an intent gaze. He seems to be waiting for me to change my mind, but the truth is, I don't have a problem with people watching me. We both know that's his issue. I'm surprised when he steps away, leaving the curtain peeled back, exposing the small catwalk and the rest of the club below.

"Skirt off, little one. Nice and slow," he instructs, leaning against one of the mirrored walls.

If it's a show he wants, it's a show he'll get. My fingers trace the smooth skin of my thighs before they find the edge of my skirt. I let the pressure pull up the material, exposing the thin coverage across my pussy. It's black and sheer, a matching set with the shirt under my harness.

The skirt falls back into place, hiding everything again. A growl pulls my attention from my teasing, but I don't look up to meet his eyes. My cheek tightens as the slight

quirk of my lips pulls into a pleased grin. His building impatience only spurs me on to draw this out further.

Reaching around, the zipper at my back sputters, tooth by tooth, as my fingers glide it down. Now wide open, the skirt falls to my ankles, pooling around my thick boots. I should feel exposed, my tiny thong leaving nothing to the imagination, but there's still no one else around but us, and I love it.

I wait for my next instruction, but his words don't come. Instead, I hear his footfalls coming quickly, and then a firm grip is around my throat, his teeth bared.

"You dirty little tease," he hisses. "I'm going to ruin your tight cunt. Have you dripping down my cock, until I'm soaked and slippery. Then, I can take your ass without any lube."

I draw in a sharp breath. I'm down for ass play, but he's always prepped me. I have no doubt I'll be gushing for him by the time we're done, but the thought of no lube has me pausing.

"Yellow."

"Mm, that's my good girl." He smiles, dropping a kiss on my nose.

Page 21

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TWENTY-ONE

HARKIN

Show Me - Dean Raven

She's finally learning to be truthful and not push herself beyond her limits just to please me. It's beautiful to watch her find that confidence and openness. Her body trembles against my touch. My fingers flex against the warm leather enclosed around her alluring throat. Using my hold, I walk her back until the edge of the swing pushes against her bare ass.

"Drop your panties and hand them to me," I say, releasing her so she can shimmy out of the strings.

The strappy piece of fabric dangles from her outstretched finger. Snatching it, I can't stop the deep inhalation I take of the soaked material before shoving it into my back pocket.

"Ready?" I ask, my hands gripping her hips.

She nods and reaches for the top leather straps of the swing, holding on tight as I lift and deposit her ass onto the seat. Her legs swing, laden down with her thick combat boots. Propping the right on my thigh, I quickly remove it and throw it out of the way before bending her leg and setting her foot in the stirrup. I do the same with the left and stand back to enjoy my view of her spread open and suspended for me.

The groan of footsteps on the catwalk outside hits my ears. I have a second to decide if this is something I'm willing to let others experience.

It's not.

I hurry across the small space, fingers wrapping around the curtain before pulling it closed as a pair of eyes meet mine before disappearing behind the black fabric.

Not today, motherfucker. Not ever.

I spin on my heels back in her direction. Her soft chuckle muffled behind her dainty hand.

"Something funny, little one." My tone is serious, even though I'm not.

"No, Sir," she manages through a blinding smile.

My knees hit the floor with a thud in front of her, and that smile quickly disappears, replaced by a fire in her dark eyes.

"I want your hands in the loops, little one. If you take them out, you'll owe me."

"Owe you what?"

I bite the inside of her thigh at her indignant tone that slips free. "I guess you'll find out when you don't listen."

With the flick of my tongue against her clit, I cut off her following argument. I won't go easy on her; my earlier threat is at the front of my mind. I want her dripping and needy, writhing so hard against my face I can't breathe in anything other than the scent of her.

Teasing her slit and probing into her tight canal gets me exactly what I want. When her thighs tighten around my head, I know the crash of her releases is coming. Her screams drown out the music's bass downstairs, adding to the sensual rhythm.

She's managed to keep her hands tight in the loops, but I have a feeling she won't be so strong with the next round. My fingers slip in and out of her cunt quickly. Scissoring to stretch her out.

"More," she gasps, her head thrown back and eyes closed.

I pull out, slapping a firm hand against her glistening pussy. "What was that, little one?" I ask, voice low and menacing.

"Sorry. More, please." She pauses, one eye peaking open down at me, before she follows up with a drawn-out, "Sir."

My hand comes down twice in quick succession at her sass. That's what tips her over. She lets go of the loops, covering herself from a third assault.

I rise from my position on the floor before her, barking a harsh, "Move your hands right now."

She whimpers at my tone but pulls away slowly, knowing the punishment for moving her hands and covering herself isn't worth it.

I click my tongue, stepping away from her. "Oh, little one. What are we going to do with you now."

"Make me come," she says, dripping with faked sweetness. The playful glint in her eyes only adds to it.

“Now, why the fuck would I let you do that?”

Her face scrunches while her tantalizing finger taps against her cheek. “Because you want to.”

“Is that so?”

She nods enthusiastically, resuming her position with her hands in the cuffs. Stepping back from where she waits, eagerness is written all over her face as I walk to the edge of the room. There’s a small panel in the wall that hasn’t been covered in mirrors. I shove against it and pop it free, revealing a velvet-lined compartment.

Rows of small instruments line the space. Clamps, cages, gags, and crops each have their spot. I trace my fingers across the different materials, from cool metal and smooth leather to the hard silicone of a ball gag, which I pluck from its hanger.

“You, little one, seem to have a lot to say tonight.”

The gag hangs from my hand when I spin back in her direction. Her eyes go wide, and she tries to shrink away. But that’s the problem with being enclosed and suspended. There’s nowhere for her to go.

“Lean forward and open that pretty little mouth for me so we can shut you up.”

She does as I ask, but I can see the fight brewing in her eyes. She’s not quick enough to tell me off because the gag’s in place and buckled behind her head in seconds.

“Much better. So fucking beautiful.”

She answers me with an aggrieved snort but slumps back and waits. My hands wander up her shins and back down her thighs to the valley between her legs. A quick

swipe against her clit is all she gets before I continue up her quivering stomach, pausing to tweak her firm nipples.

Her shirt leaves nothing to the imagination, the mesh fabric clinging to the swell of her breast and her tight pierced nipples. I still wish I could rip it from her body and expose her bare, silky flesh. I trace the leather straps that crisscross her chest and lead up to the leather collar around her neck. I loop my finger through the metal ring and use it to jerk her forward.

“I like this on you. I think we need to discuss getting you collared permanently.”

Her eyes light with eager excitement, and my chest warms, knowing she wants that just as much as I do. But that won't be happening here tonight. What will is more depraved and delicious.

“Pull hard on the loops for me.”

She yanks down against the cords, letting free a muffled squeak of surprise when her body reclines further back.

“Now relax and let go.”

Arms dropping from above, she rests them on her bent knees. There isn't much space to adjust, but she uses what she has to push against them and open herself even further.

“Fucking hell,” I groan out, licking and biting my bottom lip.

Her pussy is swollen and red, glistening from my earlier attention. But it's not nearly enough, and I want another taste.

“Fuck yourself. Show me how much your body wants me inside you.”

As her hand moves south, she slowly traces a thin path against her skin that my eyes lock onto like a missile. She rubs lazy circles on her clit, and her toes point in the stirrups, a sign of her rising pleasure. I don't stop her from working herself up. The picture of her teasing herself and the muffled whimpers against the gag have my cock throbbing and begging to be the cause of them instead. But not giving in to my need will be worth it when I sink my cock into her.

Her fingers dip lower, pressing into her entrance without any resistance. She fucks herself deep and slow. A crimson flush blooms across her cheeks and down her chest as she pulls them free from her cunt and holds them up on display for me. Her arousal coats her digits and drips down toward her wrist.

I step into her, gripping the chains of the front of the swing, and bring her extended fingers to my lips, sucking off every last drop. My cock glides up and down her warm cunt as I rock the swing back and forth.

Her wet warmth drags an animalistic growl from deep inside me. It's ready to break free and claim its prize. I shift my hips and wait for the swing to return before I'm impaling her down onto my cock in one swift thrust. She cries out behind the gag, a beautiful melody adding to the rhythm of slapping skin.

“That's it, little one. Scream all you want; they can't hear you,” I taunt, balls deep into her warm cunt.

She's pulsing around me, coating me in her slick desire, so close to the edge from all the teasing. I drop the chains and grip her hip creases, giving me a better hold to drive into her harder and at a punishing pace. Her feet kick the stirrups free, wrapping around my waist and giving her purchase to buck against me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“Come for me. Now.”

On command, she explodes as my cock hits that deep spot one last time. I enjoy the feeling of her pussy contracting against my cock, trying to coax me into joining her. Steeling my spine, I hold off my own orgasm for the next round.

I draw out slowly, still hard, and perfectly coated in her essence. She’s relaxed, eyes glassy as her pleasure wanes slowly, and the afterglow takes hold. Her legs dangle toward the ground, but she’s supported and safe.

Stepping back to the hidden compartment, I reach for an individual bottle of lube, plucking it free.

I take in her satisfied form, finally quiet and fulfilled. But we’re not done yet.

Leaning over, I lift her head, undoing the prongs of the buckle on the gag before pulling it gently from her stretched mouth and letting it fall to the floor behind us. She works her jaw back and forth, no doubt loosening the strain from keeping the same position before her lips close. Her gaze meets mine expectantly.

“Time to switch positions.”

My hold tightens on her hips, stealing her body from the warm leather cocoon. Her skin drags against mine until her feet hit the floor. Her knees give, but my arm around her waist is more than enough support.

“You’re going to turn around and bed over the swing. Then stick that pretty little ass out for me to fuck, aren’t you?”

Her eyes search mine for a moment; the question might be formed like a statement, but she knows the option’s hers.

Turning on her heels, she bends over the swing, chest flush with the hammock and hands gripping the back chains. She looks over her shoulder, giving me the sassiest little smirk.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Someone recovered quickly. Let’s see if you keep that sass with your ass stuffed full.”

The click of the lube cap steals her attention, but her shoulders deflate, releasing the tension budding there. I coat two fingers generously and drip a stream between her full cheeks. Teasing my fingers through it relaxes her muscles even further.

“Nothing we haven’t done before, sweetness. Relax for me and let me in,” I soothe and rub the tight ring of muscle.

I slowly push a single finger in when she does, letting her adjust to the new sensation. Adding a second, her hips start rocking against me, searching for more. I remove my fingers, and she whines in protest at the emptiness.

“Hush, you’ll get all you want and more.”

Lining my cock up, I hold on to her hips tightly, giving myself an anchor to control my budding desire to slam in balls deep.

“Fuck.” I suck in when the tip pushes in, and she clenches around me, strangling my cock. I pause and draw in a deep breath.

The little minx isn’t having my slow approach. Her hips jerk back, taking half of me in one swift go before sliding herself back off.

“I thought you said you were going to fuck my ass. Feels a lot more like I’m fucking you,” she taunts, voice drawn low.

My fingers wrap around her sleek ponytail and yank her back to meet my chest. Her squeal of surprise is music to my ears. “I ungag you, and you’re no longer my good girl, huh?” Fingers pulling tighter around her hair, I tilt her head back further to expose her throat. “Guess I’ll just have to treat you like the dirty little cum slut you are.” My hips drive forward, burying my cock deep to make my point.

Her strangled cries fill the room, spurring me on. My lips skate down the delicate column of her neck while my hips keep time with a brutal pace, bottoming out every time. I dig my teeth into the sensitive juncture of her neck and shoulder, sucking to soothe the sting slightly before continuing the same ministrations back up.

“Tell me, little one,” I whisper when my lips skim her ear lobe. “Are you still fucking me?”

“No, Sir,” she pants, like a bitch in heat, tone dripping with pure sexual desire.

“Are you ready for my cum up your tight little ass?”

“Yes, please. I want it!”

“Mm, as you wish.”

My fingers release from her hair, shoving her head down into the swing, giving me leverage to slam against her without pushing her body away as she relaxes against the leather.

The sound of our flesh beating against each other drowns out the whomping of blood rushing in my ears.

“Reach back and play with your clit. You’re going to come with me, do you understand?”

Her hand moves, but the words don’t come.

“Little one.”

“Yes, Sir. I underst—” But she never finishes that sentence, and I know her hand’s between her thighs rubbing desperately because her ass tightens, constricting around me.

“Fuckkkk!” I roar. My cock swells and empties into her ass, my entire body going rigid against her until the last drop spills free.

With each steading breath, my chest heaves to settle my soul back into place. When I pull free of her tight hole, her asshole coats with leaking cum.

“Don’t let it out, little one. Or you’ll be a mess the entire ride home.”

Whimpering, she comes back to me, limbs still shaking but tightening at my command. “Shh, you did so good for me, baby. We’re going to get you dressed and out of here. Can you stand for me?”

She gives me a slight nod and arches up from her bent-over position, swaying slightly when she’s back upright. Getting her taken care of and wrapped in my buttoned-up suit jacket doesn’t take long. I dress at record speed as she leans heavily against the railing outside the room. I’m not concerned with anyone bothering her in her current state—well fucked, satisfied, and still clenching to keep my cum from sliding free.

TWENTY-TWO

KEIRA

I Walk The Line - Halsey

Every muscle in my body aches, including my traitorous pussy. She makes me act against my best interest, never thinking about how we will feel the next morning. The trip to The Red Door last night was more than I could have ever expected. Something about the energy of the place subconsciously gives me the permission I'm always looking for—the unspoken approval to jump with both feet into the deep end and drown in unheard-of pleasure.

His words filter through my sleep-riddled mind. Collar. Permanently.

Thinking about it drums up the same whole-body tingles of overwhelming elation. It dawns on me that if he's been monitoring my search history, my reaction at the club shouldn't have come as a surprise. I've scoured the web for options currently on the market, saving my favorites in a secret folder he probably found without doing much digging.

Groaning, I roll out of bed. My feet hitting the floor catches Cinder's attention, and she perks up from her bed in the corner. Now that we're home, Harkin's made it abundantly clear she's no longer welcome in our bed. It's too bad for him; that only works when he's here. She joins me anytime he leaves the house. Though, that doesn't happen often.

I pull on workout shorts and one of Harkin's well-loved hoodies that falls just above my knees. I draw the fabric to my nose, inhaling the fresh, woodsy scent that's all him. It reminds me of stepping out onto the small back deck of the cabin in Colorado. The ability to smell the vegetation there, even in the middle of winter, was something of a wonder coming from the city.

"Come on, sleepyhead, let's go find the others," I say, patting the side of my thigh.

She trots obediently beside me, her soft fur brushing against my leg as we make our way down the hall. Instead of running off as I expect her to do in search of Harkin for breakfast, she heels at the end of the hallway. Her teeth are barred, and a low, menacing growl pulses low into the space, warning me.

"What the hell?" I breathe, looking down at her.

But then I feel it, the change in the air. My eyes fling up, searching across the kitchen and into the living room, when it hits me. A woman stands against the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing at the street below.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I bark out, my anger rising as she turns in my direction.

I didn't need to see her face to know Alina was standing before me. It was how her shoulders were set, the way her perfectly coiffed hair was styled, and her designer clothes draped off her petite frame.

"Well, hello to you too, sister."

"Don't call me that. You're nothing to me."

"Always, with the dramatics. Boohoo! Daddy didn't love you enough to reach out.

Get over it.”

I ignore the dig she thinks will get under my skin. She’s wrong, but why not let her think that’s the issue between us?

“Where’s Harkin?” The moment the question leaves my lips, the footsteps sound behind me. Cinder doesn’t move a muscle to double-check, sensing him the same way I can. She’s still locked on the intruder across the room, but she’s holding back since I haven’t commanded her to attack.

“Morning, sweetness,” he offers quickly, kissing my cheek. “I was hoping you’d sleep through this, but since you’re awake, why don’t you come sit down so we can discuss this.”

I don’t like how his vagueness gets my back up, but I don’t show it. Instead, I follow him across the living room to the leather sofa, where I plop down, Cinder sitting at my side, still on high alert.

“Well?” I throw out, wanting an explanation for whatever the hell this is.

Harkin drops a file folder I didn’t notice him carrying on the coffee table. Alina walks over from the window, her purse clutched tightly against her body like a shield as she eyes my dog and the papers waiting within biting distance. The idea of siccing Cinder on her brings me immense joy, but I remember she’s not just my insufferable twin sister. She’s also a mom. And if there’s one thing I know, it’s the pain of losing that person from your life. No little girl deserves that, not even when their mother is Alina.

Quickly snagging the folder from the table, she steps back a few paces to create more space between us. She flips through page after page of what, I still don’t know. Harkin’s hand lands on my knee and squeezes, reassuring me to wait before I pop off

again. I draw in deep breaths and tangle my fingers in his, agreeing silently.

“You’re sure?” Alina asks, more gently than I’ve ever heard her sound. It’s almost as if her words are drenched in hope.

“I sent a follow-up sample to confirm that Keira was a match. The doctor is ready to schedule a final consult, get paperwork signed by both of you, and get the procedure on the calendar,” Harkin answers.

I gulp down the surprised gasp, trying to break free. The bone marrow donation has been on my mind, but with everything coming at us from left, right, and center, it’s been pushed off every single time.

“When did you do all this?” I ask him quietly as Alina shifts through the papers again.

“When you were sleeping.” He squeezes my fingers and shoots me a wink.

Alina’s shuffle to shove the papers in her purse distracts me from the considerate man beside me.

“Right, well—” Alina breaks off. “Thank you.”

“We’re not doing this for you.” I try to keep the venom from my tone, but there’s only so much I can do first thing without coffee.

“I’ll have the doctor reach out from now on. There’s no need for us to be in contact.”

“Sounds great to me,” I throw out in agreement. “Oh, and Alina.”

Pausing, she stares me down.

“Don’t ever show up here again. You’re not welcome in our house.”

She scoffs. “You mean Harkin’s house.”

“She said what she meant,” Harkin confirms.

The couch shifts when he stands, ushering her out of the living room to the front door. I slump back against the couch, a giant smile pulling over my face. It’s one more thing on the list to take care of, and once it’s done, I can write her out of my life for good. An ache in my chest pushes down through my stomach when I realize the little girl I’m helping is someone I’ll never know. It’s just another nail in the casket of the blood family I’ll never have.

It is what it is. I’m ready to squash the rest of the shit and move the fuck on. To what? Who the hell knows, but I’ll figure it out when I get there.

“Coffee?” Harkin calls from the kitchen.

“Is the moon round?” I answer him, enjoying the rare chuckle it steals from him.

I let my eyes rest while I wait, reviewing the mental checklist of what my day needs to look like. The meeting is moving in swiftly, and I dread seeing Domenico again. But the nervousness of meeting someone from my mom’s side of the family is almost debilitating.

What if he blames me? I was the one she kept. I’m why she hid and broke off all communication with her family. I got her full attention for eight whole years when I’m sure he had other plans for her.

I shake my head free from the morose jabs. Fuck all that noise. Maybe I saved her from a messed-up life of living as nothing more than a piece to be manipulated and

used at her father's whim. Then again, maybe I'm projecting my short and limited experience with Domenico onto something that doesn't matter anymore because she's long gone.

"Didn't think you'd still be tired after that," Harkin interrupts my mental spiral.

Holding the mug out for me to take, I steal it and draw it up to my nose, taking in a deep sniff of the warm aroma. "Nothing wakes me up like a cup of your caffeinated tar."

"Hmm, I seem to recall something else doing a damn better job."

I take a sip, letting the heat warm my chest and send my body the signal that it can wake up and start to function on all cylinders now. "That's not the same," I finally add, watching as his eyes drift up the expanse of my exposed legs.

"How so?"

"Your coffee is like a shot of adrenaline spiking through my veins, straight to my nervous system. But your head between my legs or your cock slowly driving into me is like being swept down a lazy river that slowly brightens the scene around me the further I make it. It's like wakeful dreaming, peaceful and euphoric as I scream your name from my lips, and then the reality hits. I'm not dreaming, but that's even better because you're there."

"Sounds terrible," he says, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Hmph." I chuckle. "The worst, but If I have to wake up, I might as well start the day on a high."

"Noted."

“So, where are our counterparts this morning?” I ask, looking around like they might be hiding somewhere.

“They never came home from the club.”

I sit up with that knowledge, almost spilling my coffee. Harkin must see the worry written all over my face.

“Hey, calm down. They’re okay. James thought we might need some time alone after last night, so they went to Stacey’s.”

Taking a settling breath, I let my heart rate slow from its Olympic speed. “Do you think—” I break off, trying to decide if it’s a good idea to ask.

His knuckle tucks under my chin, lifting it to meet his gaze, eyebrow raised in question.

“Do you think they could stay there? Or is it better for us to all be together?” I finish quietly. I love my best friend, but being back in the apartment, even though I wasn’t here long before, feels like coming home. It’s something I don’t want to share, even with our closest friends.

“That’s all? You don’t want to share our space? Fine by me, sweetness. I don’t want to share anything when it comes to you. Your space, time, body—I want it all.”

I roll my eyes at him, but deep down, part of me loves hearing it. He doesn’t waste any time, pulling out his phone and typing up the text I read upside down before he sends it to James.

“Done. You only ever need to ask, sweetness. I’d give you anything that your twisted little mind could conjure.”

TWENTY-THREE

HARKIN

Call Me Devil - Friends in Tokyo

It never gets any easier leaving her dead asleep, warm, and tucked on her side in my big bed. But it's the only time I can get any work done without her curious eyes on me. Not that I'm deliberately trying to hide this from her. I just need to be one thousand percent sure before I blow up her world again. Shit, I'm not sure she has anything left to chip away at with how this last year has been.

James sent over the confirmation text earlier, letting me know the information was ready and waiting. It sat at the forefront of my mind all day while we relaxed around the house for the first time in what felt like weeks of constantly being on the go and on edge.

Secluded in my office, with the door cracked to hear her footsteps, should they come, my shoulders relax the moment my fingers rest against the keys. This is it. This is the ace up our sleeve. The one thing we might be able to use to get Domenico off our backs for good.

The code opens the encrypted file, and photo after photo appears across my screens. The evidence is damning, and there's no denying it anymore. Keira is the strongest woman I have ever met, but this here might just be the sword that severs her Achilles. That doesn't stop my brain from harping on the truth. I must tell her. And it has to be done before we track down her grandfather and force a meeting to get to him before

Domenico.

I let that knowledge guide me to the next thing on my list. Nikita dropped Keira's grandfather's possible locations in our laps. But the man has a lot of property under his and the family's name. Narrowing it down is taking more time than I expected, but there are three places left to choose from as of last night. There's a building in Midtown Manhattan, an apartment in Jersey, and a large estate outside the city. It's comical how similar Domenico and this man seem on paper.

My gut reaction says he'd be in the city. Domenico wouldn't waste time working so far out of his territory otherwise. The cameras I've been able to access haven't given me a clear shot of the man in the twenty-year-old mug shot I'm working off. But it doesn't mean he isn't there, entering from somewhere out of range.

We don't have time to send James's contact out to all the addresses for surveillance. Domenico's text could come in any day now with the meeting set. Our only option is to move in blind and half-cocked. What could go wrong?

"Fuck me," I whisper into the quiet, drawing a hand down my face.

First thing tomorrow morning, I need to tell her. Give her the evidence we've gathered and see how my girl reacts. Maybe I'm not giving her enough credit. She could be fine. I know how well she compartmentalizes the shitty parts of our situation to keep pushing through to the other side. I let her keep building up those walls. But one day, when Domenico is no longer in our hair, and my ex stops popping up out of the blue, I will pick them apart brick by brick until she's free from the tomb she built for protection.

My fingers hover over the control and P keys, my brain and body warring against each other to be open and honest instead of secretive to protect her. We made a promise, though. This is a secret we need to share. I have no right to keep it from her.

The hiss of the inkjet printer keeps my mind occupied until the last photo sits across my desk. Tucking the photos away into a file folder, I stand and stretch the kink out of my lower back. It's well past one a.m., and my brain is finally quieting now that I have a plan. Tell Keira, make our way up to midtown Manhattan, drop in on an unsuspecting grandfather to cut her father off at the knees. You know, it's just like any other typical day.

Cinder perks up from my spot, ears moving like satellites at my approach. "Bed," I command, and she desperately wants to ignore me, but knows better. At least, when I slide between the sheets, pressing into Keira's back, warmth envelops me everywhere. The combination of a settled consciousness and the warm environment makes me fall asleep in minutes.

Hours later, I'm extricating myself from Keira's limbs, wrapped around me like she's worried I'll leave her side while she sleeps. Thick gray clouds line the sky, dimming the world outside. Rivulets coat the living room windows, adding to the already darkening mood of the morning. An omen, no doubt.

My phone vibrates against the kitchen island, dragging me from loading the beans into the grinder.

We've got a situation.

I don't bother texting back, hitting his contact before bringing it to my ear. The call rings once before I hear his gruff voice on the other line.

"Nikita's dead," James says unceremoniously.

I draw in a deep breath. This is the last thing we need to add to the mix. "When?"

"Last night. It looks like a sniper shot through her window."

“Jesus Christ. How’d you hear?”

“I’ve been watching her since she popped up at the last safe house. Her place is swarming with cops and lots of suits.”

“FBI?”

“And then some. She was deep in their pockets. Working her way out of some trouble she found herself in.”

“You think it’s related to what she gave us?” I ask because I know it’s the first thought that will pop into Keira’s head.

“Timing’s inconvenient for it to be something else, but I can’t confirm otherwise.”

“Fuck! This is not what I needed. I’m about to tell Keira this morning.” I don’t need to explain more. He knows what I’ve been holding back from her. “Now, I have to break this news to her, too.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Really?”

“Too soon?”

“Way too fucking soon.”

“I’m sure she had a list a mile long of people looking to take her out. I’m not about to shoulder her death, and neither should Keira.”

“Right, well, I’ll just tell her that and say it was your advice.”

“Fuck you,” he spits, but there’s a lightness to his tone. “I’ll keep you posted if I hear anything more.”

“Alright, man. Thanks for the update. Oh, and tell Stacey to keep her phone on her. I’m sure Keira will reach out today after I dump all this shit on her plate.”

“Copy that.”

The line goes silent. I let the phone clatter to the countertop and grip my fingertips around the edge, hanging my head. Another stone on the pile, trying to topple the entire thing. Going through the motions, I make us coffee, steel my shoulders, and head back to the bedroom.

I leave her mug on my nightstand and slip back into bed, sitting up against the headboard. Weighing my options, I spend the next hour debating which piece of shitty news I should start with while watching her sleep peacefully. Ultimately, it comes down to what will send her spiraling further. Her body begins to stir against the sheets, eyelids fluttering open. A small, sleepy smile pulls across her face when she spots me.

“Morning, beautiful.” I finally break the silence of the still room.

“Another coffee wake-up, I see.” She eyes the empty mug in my hands, raising a sassy eyebrow.

“Sorry to disappoint.” I let out a small huff of laughter, reaching back behind me for her now cold mug of coffee. “It’s cold. I can go warm it up for you.”

“No need,” she says, sitting cross-legged next to me. The sheet wrapped around her waist, breast bared to distract me. “Were you watching me sleep?”

“Mhmm.”

“Creep.”

“Not the first time, sweetness. And I can promise you it won’t be the last.”

That gets a big smile from her. She hides it behind the rim of her coffee cup, taking a sip.

“Why do you look like someone kicked your puppy?”

The saying seems ridiculous now that I have a dog for the first time in my life. I can’t imagine anyone kicking Cinder and leaving me with what I can only assume is more a look of dread than one of sorrow.

“We need to talk.” I hate those four little words the moment they come out of my mouth. I can see the panic rise in her eyes. Her anxiety is diving headfirst at the wrong assumption. “Stop right now. It’s not about us.” When her shoulders visibly relax, mine follow. “James called earlier. He got an alert that something happened.”

“Would you just spit it out? This peeling off the Band-Aid shit is making it worse, Harkin.”

“Nikita’s dead, taken out by a sniper. It doesn’t mean it has anything to do with us or what we asked her to investigate. James said the place was crawling with suits, and it seems she was deeper in with the feds than she let on.”

Keira’s eyes are wide, her finger thrumming against the mug gripped tightly between both hands. She doesn’t respond, but I can see the wheels turning in her mind. It’s hitting her hard, but she doesn’t show it with tears or theatrics. Instead, her face gets this pinched, determined look, like she’s about to jump out of bed and make a break

for Nikita's apartment. I drop my hand to her knee.

"There isn't anything we can do. If we go poking around the scene, it'll only draw suspicion our way. We can't afford to have that kind of heat on us right now when we're working against two of the five crime syndicates in New York City. But James is keeping an eye on things from afar. He'll let us know if anything new comes of it."

She's quiet for another moment, staring into her mug like the answers to all our problems are swirling around in there for her. "Is there proof?"

"Proof?" I ask, not sure where she's going with this.

"Proof that she's dead. If she was working with the feds or trying to take people worse than my father down, how do we know she was actually shot? Maybe they're doing all of this to get her into witness protection, or fuck, maybe she's been kidnapped."

"Sweetness." I run my hand soothingly across her thigh.

"In either of those situations, she would have been taken away quietly, simply vanished for a while. There wouldn't be half of the NYPD camping around her home for the last twelve hours."

"Fuck!" The excuses seem to wash away at my words, taken over by a sudden fury.

The mug in her hands flies across the room, crashing against the wall, coffee dripping down the white paint. She gets off the bed, stomping back and forth in front of me.

"This is all my fault. I never should have involved her."

There it is, the moment I was dreading. I knew she'd blame herself in this situation,

regardless of Nikita's associations.

"Keira." I try to pull her from her whispered musing, but she doesn't stop to look at me. Standing from the bed, I move into her path, and her body collides with mine. "Keira," I say again, a little more sternly this time. My tone and fingers holding her in place by the shoulders stop her, and she looks up. "This isn't your fault. Even if, and I say if with the smallest possibility, Domenico was involved, this is on him. You didn't hire the person to take the hit. You didn't pull the trigger. It's too heavy of a burden to bear."

She falls into my chest, letting me hold her while she processes only half of the news I need to share. After a few quiet moments, she pulls back, finding my eyes.

"I'm going to find out who did this to her. I'm going to find them, and when I do, they're going to regret the choice they made to take her life."

I cup her face, and she leans into it, not losing any of the fierce determination in her eyes. "One thing at a time, sweetness. But the news about Nikita isn't all I need to talk to you about. Come to my office."

TWENTY-FOUR

KEIRA

Trouble Finds You - Juliet Simms

My brain is still tripping over the news about Nikita, and now he drops there's more. What a way to wake up and start my day. I know him. He's saved the worst for last so that he can handle the fallout. That only makes my footsteps more hesitant as I follow him down the long hallway to his office. Nervous energy pours off him in waves, filling the room with an uncomfortable air. For the first time in a very long time, I don't feel at ease in this apartment.

Harkin steps behind his desk, pulling open a drawer, before dropping a file folder onto the desktop. A sense of déjà vu washes over me. One where that file was full of information he and James had collected about me. Now, it's a weight I struggle to lift from the surface. When I finally do and open it to reveal what's inside, my entire world halts on its axis.

"What the... hell is this?" I stammer, the words getting caught in my throat.

"I found it while trying to locate your grandfather."

"Harkin, this is. No. It's not real." The file and its contents tumble to the floor from my trembling hands.

A piercing sharpness settles in my chest, knocking what little breath I have out of my

system. It's happening. The room is closing in. Sweat beads at the nape of my neck and temples, but my fingertips grow numb. I crumble to the floor. The hard knock of my knees hitting doesn't register. I dig my fingers into the thick carpet, grasping for a lifeline.

Heaviness settles around my body, but it's hot and overwhelming my system. I struggle against it, but I can't break free. It doesn't move away, no matter how hard I fight. Exhaustion creeps in quickly, with my breaths still shallow, and eventually, I go limp, surrendering to the darkness bleeding into my vision.

A soft thump, thump, pats against my chest. The rhythmic feeling focuses my vision of the bookshelf across the room. Harkin's firm arm presses tight against my chest to settle my back against him.

"Come on, baby, breathe for me. In for five, out for five." Harkin's worried whisper draws me in. His large hand falls from my chest over my abdomen. "Breathe into my hand," he instructs.

After a few gasping intakes of air, I can finally settle into his instructions. He doesn't let go, doesn't rush me through the breathing, doesn't even make to stand once my body relaxes and my anxiety has calmed to a place where I can function.

"I want to go see her," I murmur under my breath, knowing damn well he's going to tell me it's a terrible idea.

We don't know what's going on. My mind can't even piece together a reality in which the pictures he gave me are real and not some sick and twisted mind game. I need to see for myself. I'm not saying it's impossible. Alina's reemergence is evidence enough. But I was there when she died. The events of that morning are burned layers deep into my psyche.

“I knew you would. It’s why I waited to tell you. The pictures we found are from an apartment building your grandfather owns in Midtown.”

I whip around to look at him. “Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

Nimble fingers push back a lock of hair that’s fallen free from my messy bun. “I’ll follow you anywhere, sweetness.” He pauses, eyes volleying back and forth from mine to the mess of photos scattered across the office floor. “But we don’t know what we’re walking into. I’ve yet to locate your grandfather at this location, but that doesn’t mean he’s not there with her. I just want you prepared for anything to happen.”

“I’ve got this. I know it might not seem like it after, well, after that panic attack, but I can handle this.”

“I know you can.” His lips press into my forehead, instilling confidence deep within me.

“I’ll have James meet us there. He won’t get involved unless he’s needed.”

Hopping up from his lap, I spin around, hand held out to help him off the floor. “Great, we’ll leave in ten.”

The traffic creates a steady hum, twisted in the slap of footsteps against the sidewalk. We stand out of the flow of foot traffic, scoping out the four-story apartment building across the street. There’s nothing special about it; it’s a nondescript building squished between two others just the same.

“You’re sure this is the one?” I ask Harkin.

He’s leaning against the building with me, his hands shoved in the pockets of his

jeans. “It’s what all our intel led to. It also houses the camera I was able to hack, which unveiled your mom. James sent his guy here to stake out the place and confirm it was her. That’s where the other photos came from.”

My fingers trace the edges of the knife tucked into my pocket. The familiar shape steadies my nerves. I kick off the wall and step onto the road, looking for traffic before darting across to the other side, Harkin close on my heels.

“It’s the door to the left.”

When I reach for the handle and pull it, nothing happens. The dumb thing is locked. I should have expected it, but my brain’s focused on stepping over the threshold.

Meanwhile, Harkin’s got his fingers on the call board, pressing each button to page the entire building. Many ignore the call, but when someone answers, he quickly responds.

“I’ve got a food delivery. Can you buzz me in?”

The person on the other end must be expecting something or doesn’t care about letting random people into the building. A half-dead buzzing sound comes, then the click of the front door unlatching. I quickly reach for the handle again, and this time, the door pulls free, and we step inside.

It’s marginally nicer than the apartment building I was living in. I freeze when the door latches again behind us, realizing I have no clue where to go from here.

“Now what?” I ask Harkin, hoping there’s still something he’s been leaving out.

He nods down the entrance-level hallway. It’s short, only going back enough for one or two apartments. “We start down here and make our way up. I told you I couldn’t

locate him in the building, but with some dumb luck, maybe your mom opens the door to one of these.”

“You think New Yorkers are going to open their doors to a couple of strangers on their doorstep.”

Pulling a badge from his inside jacket pocket, he holds it up for me to infer his plan.

“Impersonating a police officer?”

“Look closer.”

The badge is a random crest, but the title of Inspector is big enough for anyone to read through the peephole. “I don’t think that’s any better.”

“Desperate times, sweetness. Do you have a better idea?”

I think about it and I’m sure if I’d had the forethought, I could have come up with something. But it’s too late. We’re already standing in the hallway, wasting precious time.

“Fine,” I agree and knock on the first door.

When we hit the third-floor landing, the wind’s gone from my sails. It’s two in the afternoon in the middle of the week. Most of the knocks went unanswered, but the few people we managed to pull to the door were annoyed by the interruption to their day. When we showed my mother’s picture, they all quickly shut the door in our faces. It’s the only reason I’ve kept going.

“She has to be here,” I whisper under my breath, knocking on the first door in the hallway.

It's the same as all the rest until we reach the second to last door. This time, when we get someone to come to the door, a stout older woman looks us up and down.

"There's no soliciting in this building." Her thick Irish accent sparks a glimmer of hope in my chest.

"We're not selling anything. I'm just looking for the woman in this picture."

I pull the photo I've been carrying around all day to show her. She takes it into her sun-speckled, saggy hands. Her gaze darts from the photo, over its edge, up to me. Her eyes squint as if scrutinizing me and drawing a decision.

"What business do you have with her?"

"It's personal, family business."

An unexpected derisive snort answers me. "There's nothing here for you, girl. Best be on your way. And a word of advice: don't come snooping around here again. The building manager doesn't appreciate it."

With that, the door slams in our faces. "Well..."

"Well, indeed." Harkin parrots, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from the woman's door. "Let's go," he says, ushering us back toward the stairs.

I whirl around to face him, stopping us on the landing. "But she."

His head shakes, but he doesn't say anything. His eyes quickly scan to the wall across from us. At the top, butted up against the ceiling, is a dome camera. The red light blinks in time with my racing heart.

I get it. Someone's watching, and whatever that woman said, it set off his protective instincts. Our feet thud against the stairs as we rush from the third floor back to the entrance door of the building. I shove the front door open, turning back to find out whatever it is that Harkin picked up on. But a rough, firm grip grabs both of my arms, hauling me out onto the sidewalk faster than I can process what's happening.

Harkin's quick to draw his gun from his waistband, but when he lifts it, clicking the safety off, it's not his voice that comes out with a threat. A tall-broad man with a balding head steps out from the shadows of the front door. A similar gun pointed at the back of Harkin's head.

"I'd drop that if I were you. I don't mind leaving you here bleeding out. It's her the boss wants to see."

"Fucking hell," I scream. "Unhand me, you piece of shit, good for nothing dog. I'm going to kill my father for this."

"Well, don't you have a mouth on you. I suppose I can't be all too surprised. But your father..." He pauses, spitting on the ground in disgust. "Has nothing to do with this. Let's go, princess."

I stop fighting, my body running cold as his words settle in. "He's coming with me," I snap. I'm not sure how much sway I have with these men, but I can either go with them quietly or fight them at every turn.

"Whatever the princess wants." It's then I notice the Irish accent peeking through. It's not as thick as the woman's upstairs. It's soft, as if he picked it up from being around native speakers or left the country too long ago for it to keep its hold.

The man or men, I can't tell how many there are, with my eyes locked on Harkin's, soften the grips on my arms, shoving me forward into Harkin's open embrace. He

tucks me into his side after placing his gun away.

“Don’t say anything,” he whispers in my ear.

His tone isn’t worried. There’s not a trace of concern for the gun still trained on the back of his head. They know he’s my weak spot. That I’ll cooperate as long as he’s safe by my side. After all my experiences with Dom, that tells me they’re under direct orders to leave me unharmed. It settles my hackles slightly.

In the middle of the day, with the sun high in the sky, no one stops or even questions two people getting shoved in the back of a white van with a plumbing company name on the side. He pushes us to the dirty floor, between metal shelves filled with plumbing supplies. It makes me wonder if they double as blue-collar men or if it’s solely to keep up the act should they get pulled over.

Two men climb into the front seats, and another follows us into the back. He sits against the grated door between us and the driver. His gun never leaves my sight, but it’s no longer poised to shoot at a moment’s notice. Harkin scoots me closer to the rear exit, putting himself between me and whoever these guys are. My guess is we’re heading right for the man we’ve been searching for.

Harkin’s hand grazes the inside of my upper arm. I don’t think anything of it until he pauses and retraces his path. His fingers press against the implant. Right, continuously being tracked. James is undoubtedly two cars back, following us to a place my grandfather probably thinks is impenetrable.

TWENTY-FIVE

HARKIN

Game of Survival - Ruelle

After that old woman's warning, I knew we had to get out of there. We'd made a show of ourselves by going door-to-door, flashing that photo to every resident. Someone knew precisely whose building they lived in and where Keira's mother was. We'd been spotted and sold out before reaching the third floor. I'd wanted to get out of there before we ended up in this spot. But my plan to wait and watch who arrived didn't pan out.

I mindlessly trace my fingers against Keira's leg to keep from cutting this trip short. The clanking of loose tools on the shelves around us keeps my eyes scanning, worried we'll be taken out by a metal wrench before we get to wherever we're going. It also distracts me from keeping track of each turn we make. Something unnecessary with the trackers, but my brain refuses to leave everything up to technology, no matter how good I know it is.

Baldie in the front seat taps on the metal door, and the bozo in front of me reaches into his pocket, pulling out two handkerchiefs. He unceremoniously throws them both in my lap before barking out a command to put them on.

"Fuck you. I'm not putting shit on," Keira sasses from behind me.

The guy looks like he wants to jolt from his seat to strangle her. Trust me, buddy, I

know the feeling well.

“Handle it. We’re here,” the driver calls out as the van starts to slow.

Our buddy in the back shifts, trying to balance in the moving vehicle. Their mistake was not taking the time to restrain us. Now, he’s got zero chance of getting me to put on the blindfold, let alone getting near enough to Keira to even touch her.

“Never gonna happen, buddy,” I try to reason with him. But I assume his head tells him I’m less of a threat than the man who keeps ordering him around.

His hand snaps out to grab the fabric he discarded in my lap, but I’m faster. The second one is already in my hands, and his neck is perfectly exposed. Shooting up in one quick motion, I wrap the handkerchief around his throat and twist it behind him. He’s so worried about the noose tightening around his neck that he doesn’t realize I’m up and behind him in a blink, pushing him down to the disgusting carpet of the van, my boot shoved into the middle of his back. He grapples with the fabric, trying to pull it away, but I have all the leverage.

That is, until the back and side doors fly open, letting in the midday sun. “Let him go.” His command breaks my concentration, and I look up from the struggling man under my foot.

Guns are raised in my direction; I don’t stop. I’d been a little too busy to notice Keira in the scuffle, but she’s now the center of everyone’s attention. My girl braces in front of me, both hands clasped around deadly steel, as she points right back at each man waiting outside.

Everyone’s attention shifts to the man desperately clawing at anything he can get his hands on. The wheezing through his nose is the only sound in the cabin.

“He doesn’t look like he’s going to make it, guys,” Keira says with mock concern. “Drop your guns and let us out without the blindfolds, and Harkin here will let him pass out instead of killing him. How does that sound?”

I shift my weight, readjusting. The things coming out of her mouth with every ounce of complete control over our situation have my cock growing hard.

“You’re your fucking mother’s daughter,” Baldie bites out, and Keira’s shoulders stiffen, but she doesn’t drop her arms. On the other hand, he shoves his pistol back in its holster.

“Nighty, night,” I whisper next to the guy’s ear as he passes out, and I finally let go of the fabric around his neck.

They escort us from the van across a desolate parking lot. The only thing in sight is a row of rundown metal buildings that look like they once housed aircraft. The men march us through a door with more security than my apartment. It’s code and fingerprint protected. But that’s only the first half. We’re locked in a small room, blocked by a second door when we step inside. A camera in the corner blinks red. Baldie looks up into the camera for a vetting process I’m sure is happening elsewhere. The slide bolt lock disengages, and he shoves the door open.

The exterior we walk up on has no standing on the interior when we step through the second door. It’s pristine, broken up into multiple sections, some open to where we are now, while others are closed off. I check above, and there, too, is a catwalk that spans the entire space. Two men on opposite ends stand guard with rifles strapped to their backs and pistols at their thighs.

This place is locked down tight. My guess is it’s a storage house, and it’s a bold choice for a meeting. It’s very different from the posturing we’re used to with Dom. The open space is undecorated, with just a few plastic folding tables and chairs, a

small TV and radio, and a mini fridge.

Baldie leads us across the floor to a hallway. The light dims as the walls close in, and I tuck Keira closer to my side. He stops and pounds on a door that looks like it might give way under the pressure.

“Boss, they’re here,” he calls.

“Come in.”

He pushes the door open for us to enter, but doesn’t follow, pulling the door closed behind us. The small office isn’t much to look at, a desk with a mess of papers and a few filing cabinets. It’s dark and closed in without the offer of natural light.

Not moving to stand or greet us, he points to the two metal folding seats in front of his relic of a work surface. Keira sits unceremoniously, and her attention never wavers from the new addition to her list of long-lost family members. Without breaking their moment, I stand sentry behind her, arms crossed over my chest, ready to watch how this will unfold.

After a tense minute, he finally breaks the silence. A thick Irish brogue laces his tone. “Well, aren’t you a vision from the past?”

Keira ignores the inference, refusing to beat around the bush like the force of nature she is. “Where is she? Why are you hiding her?”

The older man looks puzzled. When she doesn’t immediately get an answer, she pushes forward, bombarding him with more questions.

“Why are you keeping her there? Why did she leave me? Answer me!” she screams, but he doesn’t look phased by her emotional outburst.

Her hand disappears into her coat pocket. That same photo we'd been using to search the apartment building slams to the desk between them. "Her." She shoves her finger into the photo. "I want to see her right now." Slumping back into her chair, her shoulders heave in quick succession.

"Ahh, this is why you were bothering my tenants. You made a few very nervous, poking around."

"Don't worry, they didn't narc on you," she bites out, the annoyance in her tone thick.

"No, I don't imagine they would. However, you bothered them for nothing. The woman you're looking for isn't who I'm assuming you think she is." He pauses, reaching across the mess of papers to turn an old metal picture frame around in our direction. "That might help you understand the situation a bit better."

Keira hesitates, but the photo of two women eventually pulls her forward. She snatches the frame off the desk and brings it closer to inspect.

"No, you're lying."

"Why would I lie to you? The woman you are looking for, the one you think is your mother, is your aunt, your mother's younger sister. They are not quite twins, like you and your sister, but they were born within the same year. Their resemblance has always been uncanny; everyone mistook them for twins when they were little. I'm sure she looks much like your mother would today if she were still with us."

My eyes shoot down to Keira, worried that this revelation will send her spinning. The information should have come up in my digging, but my one-track mind wasn't open to the possibility. Plus, when these families don't want records discovered, they simply don't exist, no matter your connections and ability to hack into databases.

“I... I have an aunt?” Keira stumbles.

I drop a hand to her shoulder and squeeze, letting her know I’m still here, anchoring her. “You seem to know a lot for someone who supposedly just learned he had granddaughters?”

He takes me in for the first time since we entered his office. The gentle gaze he uses with Keira hardens. It’s my first glimpse of the man behind the grandfather title. He’s Patrick Donahue, and his reputation precedes him. He’s the ruthless head who waged war against the mafia and won. He pushed out the Bratva and stopped the Yakuza from gaining a foothold in the city. He’s been king of the boroughs for years, laying claim to anything useful and throwing scraps when needed. It’s no wonder Dom’s desperate to hold something over his head. It’s too bad for him; the very pawn he intends to manipulate hates everything about him.

“Harkin, I presume? My men tell me you’re the reason both of my granddaughters aren’t brainwashed by their father.”

Keira snorts before she says, “There’s not a chance in hell I would have given in to his demands to join his fucked up little family. And just so we’re clear, and on the same page, I have zero intention of letting you use me to get back at him either.”

“You’re so much like your mother,” Patrick says, a rough, raspy laughter pulling from his chest.

“You know, I’m getting fucking tired of hearing that from people. How could I be like either of my parents, considering neither was around to raise me.”

“Nature versus nurture. You have her fierceness and stubborn attitude. I can already tell.”

“So, are you just like him? Did you know about the two of us? Did you know your daughter had twins and placed one with a pretentious family in California while the other struggled to make it to eighteen? Did you hate that half our blood came from him, enough to leave me on the streets to starve?”

He lets her hurtful words hang in the air, filling the room with an emotional charge ready to erupt and cause devastation to all of us trapped in the small space

For someone in his later years, he moves stealthily from his seat around the desk in seconds. He drops in the chair to Keira's left, giving her his entire focus, before he reaches out and grabs her hands to hold in his.

“You may have been wrong about your mother still being alive. But there is more to her story and yours that you should know.”

TWENTY-SIX

KEIRA

Everything's A Lie - Klergy, LEXICON ect.

I have a sinking suspicion this conversation will break the last shred of hope I still have swimming around. It'd already taken an asteroid-sized hit with the news that my mother wasn't, in fact, still walking around the city. As nervous as I was for the possibility that I might get to see her again, no matter the anger that boiled within me at her possible reasons to stay away, hearing him confirm what my logical brain knew all along was like losing her all over again.

But now wasn't the time or place to let that fully process. I'd let Domenico fill in the blanks of my mother's past, but his side would always be skewed. I needed more information to corroborate his stories or even dismiss them. I'd take what they had to say and paint my own picture of what I felt was the truth. At the end of the day, the only one who knew the unfiltered truth of it all was dead, and she hadn't left behind a crumb to go by.

"Tell me what you think you know about me and my mother. I'd love to hear it." I can't help the strong sarcasm that snakes through my tone. I'm annoyed that this little impromptu gathering isn't meeting my expectations.

"Your mother thought she was sneakier than she was. Or maybe my household was further locked down than she imagined. She never came to me with the news that she was pregnant, but the housekeeper caught on quickly. Hard not to when your life

revolves around caring for those in a household.”

“You’re telling me your staff ratted out my mother? You knew the entire time she was expecting and just let her hide it?”

“I was a very different man decades ago. Family was important, but my time and energy were always focused elsewhere. The girl’s mother, your grandmother, had already passed. God rest her soul. But no, the woman in question didn’t tell me. Not until—” He pauses, looking over my shoulder.

I follow his gaze, noticing a large framed photo on a small table. It’s too small and too dark to make out the people clumped together, but it must be family, my family.

He shakes off whatever reverie pulled him from his story and continues, “Not until after your mother disappeared.”

“You mean when she ran. Went into hiding, trying to get away from everything.” I didn’t even know half of it, but I couldn’t deny that if my mom had left everything behind, there was a good enough reason. She abandoned her sister, the comfort of being well off and taken care of, and a boy she must have at least believed she loved. From everything I’d experienced in the last year, I’d bet all that I owned on her doing it out of love and preservation for the both of us.

“Your mother probably thought the worst would happen if she came back here with a baby bundled in her arms. But she was wrong. What your father and his uncle did, ripping your sister from her, was worse than anything she would have faced coming home with the two of you.”

“She was fifteen and growing up in the middle of a turf war between two kingpins. How else would you expect her maternal instincts to react? I don’t even want children, and I would have done the exact same fucking thing.”

“I expected her to come home to her family,” he says gruffly, the first sign of emotion bleeding into his story. “But you’re right. Over the years and things that happened, I could no longer find fault in your mother’s decisions.”

“But you still knew we were out there. We didn’t go far. It’s not like she even tried all that hard to hide us away. With fake names and a tiny apartment in a city of millions, we were still well within your domain. And what, with you being, well, you, how didn’t you find us?” Emotions I’ve been able to shove into the recesses of my mind come flooding out as it dawns on me.

“I did.”

I shove away from him, the chair knocking back into Harkin, who’s been extremely quiet this entire time. My fist connects with the wall, and the cheap particle board crumbles at the impact. The minor destruction isn’t enough to release the overwhelming sense of fury building in my gut. I need more.

How can these men just leave their daughters to suffer? My father and grandfather are two sides of the same coin. Their issues may stem from differences in blood, but they both make the same decisions when it comes down to it.

“You need to listen to the rest of what I have to tell you.”

I whirl on my heels, my hand clenching against the sting radiating through my knuckles, the other thrown up to stop him from saying anything else. “What difference does it make now? You knew. You led us down the path that got my mother killed in the middle of the street, probably as retribution for something you did. It’s your fucking fault she’s dead.”

His venomous glare would be more intimidating if my temper weren’t in complete control of my actions and thoughts. Even when he stands and towers over my petite

frame, it doesn't matter. Harkin moves in my peripheral, but I hold a hand out to stop him. As red as Patrick's face blazes, I don't feel unsafe here. Maybe there's something wrong with my self-preservation, but it's never steered me wrong.

"Your mother made her choices. I could have dragged you both back and locked you up. Or maybe it would have been better for everyone to send you away to another state or back to our home country. But there are eyes everywhere and rats within my own system. You were both safe off your father's and great uncle's radar. So, I did what I thought was best. I left you both to discover what life was like for those without a family to rely on. I kept my distance and looked after you from afar. Your mother never knew the extent of my reach. The building you grew up in, mine. The work she was hired to do without any experience, my connections. Even the woman who watched you before you were old enough to go to school."

"Then what happened? If you were so on it, how did he find us?" I choke over the resentment clogging my throat.

"Like you said, you weren't very far. All it took was for someone to recognize her and run their mouth to the wrong person. The city might be full of unsuspecting people going about their lives, but in the wrong neighborhood, you're one gossip away from disaster, and disaster it was."

My rage crumbles into nothing more than emotional torment. It wasn't anything she did. It wasn't a vendetta. It was a man scorned by a teenage girl on a power trip that caused my mother's death. Maybe there was more to the story, but no one's dropped that secret yet. At this point, I'm not sure I can handle it. My head hurts. I want to go home, crawl into our bed and forget that today ever happened.

This is too much. I came here expecting information about my mother. Information that would tell me where to find her. Our last ounce of hope was that we might have something to hold over Dom's head. All today has accomplished is another jarring

trip down memory lane I never asked for.

Drawing in a deep breath, I shake off the last twenty minutes. I know I need to process all this, but now isn't the right time. We have more important things to deal with right now, especially now that we've finally found and have an audience with the man Domenico is so desperate to meet with.

"Speaking of disasters, my father wants a meeting with you."

He takes the sidestep in conversation in stride, not missing a beat. "He does. My men have set up a time and place."

"Do you know what he wants?"

His hand works against his long white goatee. "I have my suspicions."

He doesn't elaborate, and it pisses me off. "You know I'll be there," I add, trying to draw more information from him.

"I'm aware," is his only response.

The man from moments ago who wouldn't stop talking is gone. In his place, now zipped up tight with his business on the table, is the boss everyone else must be used to. He exudes an unearthly power without all the bells and whistles. Where Domenico is the storybook depiction of a mobster: lavish house, tailored suits, and gelled-up muscle, Patrick is the complete opposite.

He looks like he just came off a construction site. His hands are literally stained and dirty, and I try not to think about the cause. It's funny, really. I'm being thrust into the life my mother fought so hard to keep us out of. I guess what they say is true: the past always comes back to haunt us, even when we're not the ones it should be

haunting.

I step back, bumping into a solid wall of muscle. “Well, if that’s all, we should go. Guess I’ll see you again soon.” I sidestep around the metal chair and head for the door, Harkin, my ever-present shadow. I pause, hand outstretched for the knob, and peek over my shoulder. “Oh, and a word of advice. That twin of mine might look all sweet and angelic, but she’s under his influence. However Domenico tries to sell her, just know it’s a lie.”

As we exit, he doesn’t try to stop us, but the last thing I notice is a surprising look of pride in his eyes. The walk from his office out the front of the building is tense. His men still take up around the space, but they don’t interfere. There’s no scanning of eyes or secret codes to step through the double doors, and when we get outside, the two men from before wait beside their kidnapping van.

They spin quickly, hands drawing weapons, as the crunch of tires steals their attention from our arrival. I recognize the blacked-out SUV. James slams on the brakes when a bullet grazes the edge of the car.

“Enough,” I yell over the cacophony of chaos about to erupt around us.

It grabs their attention, but an ear-piercing whistle echoing off the surrounding buildings makes the men freeze. We all spin toward the newcomer, resting against the frame of the door to the warehouse. Patrick Donahue, my grandfather, calls his men back like school children.

The scene causes a giggle to build in my chest, but I stifle it from erupting. James pulls ahead and blocks us from the building to get in. Unexpectedly, Stace occupies the passenger seat, so we jump in the back and take off.

Her blonde locks whip around, smacking James in the face as she spins in her seat to

take me in. “You good?”

“Girl, I am far from good. Want to trade families?”

She lets out a soft chuckle, but her eyes brim with concern. “Babes, there’s a reason you’ve never met my family. You might not be asking that if you had.”

I don’t know much about Stacey’s family besides the fact that she comes from old European money. The kind of money that comes with castle estates in the hills of some small country town where the letters don’t spell out the actual word. Yet, she’s been alone in the city since she was sixteen.

“You’re right. Family sucks,” I say, wrinkling up my face to exaggerate my point.

“Thank fuck for friends. Am I right?” Stacey adds.

“Language,” James whispers under his breath, eyes still focused on the road.

Hers roll in response with a quick shake of her head. I don’t know how they know, but his hand files out like the bullet from earlier, reaching for her chin to bring her eyes to his. He quickly flicks them back and forth, keeping us on a steady path home. When he drags her in close to whisper something unintelligible in her ear, my lips pull between my teeth, and I shift in my seat.

Watching him handle her regardless of who’s around is sexy as hell. It sidetracks my brain from the mess we just experienced and throws my hormones in the driver’s seat. Harkin doesn’t miss my reaction. His large hand falls to the top of my thigh, squeezing the muscle. His lips brush against my ear.

“Are you getting wet watching him correct her, little one?”

A quiet whimper breaks free when his teeth graze the shell of my ear, and his hand shoves between my clenched thighs, sending a shiver through my body. It hums to life under his attention when his thumb presses firmly against my core. My hips buck, seeking more and making me desperate. I'm no longer paying attention to whatever is happening in the front seat. All I can think about is the fact that we're still miles away from the apartment, but I'm minutes away from breaking Harkin's rule about audiences.

TWENTY-SEVEN

HARKIN

Worship - Ari Abdul

A flush breaks out across her cheeks, and my attention splits between her obvious arousal and the couple in the front seat. Keira shoves her hips closer to my hand trapped between her thighs, and the leather seat creaks. She won't want to give us away, but her desperation multiplies, thrusting those cares away.

“Tell me, little one, if I shove my hand down your pants and spear my fingers into your tight cunt, are you going to give me something to clean off.”

That has her face whipping toward me. I haven't moved away, and our noses knock. Her eagerness comes out in quick breaths that fan across my face. Fuck it, I'll break my rules for her.

“Turn up the music,” I bark.

James doesn't miss a beat, turning the volume to a deafening level. I see Stacey turning toward us in my periphery, but a blur stops her progress, and my attention moves entirely back to Keira.

Surging forward, I close the small distance and capture Keira's surprise. It only takes her a second to realize what's happening. In any other circumstance, I'd make her wait until we were back at the apartment and away from prying eyes and ears, but I

know she needs this.

Our tongues tangle, and for once, she's not battling for dominance. She lets me ravage her mouth like this might be the last time my lips touch hers. I slip my hand from her core, and she growls her protest. But when my fingers open the button of her jeans, she pulls back, snapping her eyes to the front seat and back to me.

My eyebrows rise, and my head tilts slightly, a silent command for her to sit still and let me do this for her. She looks one last time and resigns, parting her legs to give me better access. It's all the approval I need to do, just as I teased. When my fingers find her core warm and wet, I shove two inside, and they meet zero resistance. I swallow down her gasp, working in and out of her tight pussy. It contracts around me, the muscles trying to pull me in deeper than I can with our current restrictions.

"So fucking wet, little one. Are you going to scream for me when you coat me in your cum?"

My lips skate down, across her chin, and along the column of her delicate neck. Her head falls back against the headrest with a thud. I let my thumb skim across her clit, and her core clamps down on my fingers. I squeeze a third finger inside her and stroke her front wall slowly, my thumb rubbing circles at the same time.

"Fuck, Harkin. Please. Please let me come," she begs softly for my ears only.

With her legs sprawled wide and her glossy eyes distant, it's clear the others in the car no longer matter to her.

"Then come, little one. I want to hear you scream my name."

My permission, coupled with the steady assault of my hand working her cunt, sends her over the edge. The music doesn't cover her explosion, but it muffles the raspy

scream of my name just enough.

I won't stop until she's convulsing with tiny twitches and her taut body slackens. She tilts her hips away and whimpers. When my fingers work free, they glisten in the sunlight. She's the sweetest taste I've ever had on my lips. My cock pulses in agreement, and I readjust to a more comfortable position.

Our timing is perfect. The SUV pulls into the underground parking garage while Keira's buttoning her jeans back into place. I snag her hand and drag her out of the backseat, racing for the elevator bank.

My cock throbs painfully with her taste still on my tongue. I need her now. The button for the elevator isn't calling it down fast enough. I can feel her gaze burning into the side of my face, but if I look at those kiss-swollen lips and the blush still spread across her cheeks and chest, I won't have it in me to wait until we get upstairs.

The elevator finally dings upon its arrival, but the metal doors glide open at a glacial pace. Before they've opened fully, we're inside, and I'm forcing the floor button down hard enough to jam the bones in my finger.

"That's not going to make it go any faster," she says from behind me.

I don't need eyes on her to see the smile creeping across her face from her smart-ass comment. My composure snaps. When the doors close and the elevator lifts from the garage floor, I pull the emergency stop, and the whole box jerks to a halt.

The emergency alarm blares to life, but I ignore it. There's something more important to handle. Spinning on my heels, I close the space between us, hand shooting out to take her delicate throat in my hand.

"Kneel," I command, giving her a generous squeeze.

Her knees hit the floor with a soft thud. Those beautiful eyes dance with excitement. I make quick work of undoing my belt and jeans, letting them fall open and down just enough to release my aching cock.

“Let’s see you sass me when you’re gagging on my cock, little one.”

She sticks her rosy tongue out in offering, flattening the surface. Tracing my cock against the wetness, I shove in deeper with each thrust of my hips. She’s eager for me now, grabbing onto my thighs and hauling me into her.

Her throat squeezes around my dick when she swallows me down and gags at the fullness. I’m so pent up from the feel of her pussy around my fingers in the car that it won’t take much longer to bust my load.

“Fuck, Keira,” I groan, slapping my hands against the wall.

She pulls back and licks up my shaft, circling the head. My cock twitches at her teasing appreciation. Her warm hand cups my balls and massages as she takes me back into her throat, humming as the first beads of cum leak from my tip.

“Such a dirty little slut, desperate to drink me down.”

With my head hanging between my outstretched arms, I don’t miss how her hips shift at my words. My girl just came, but that never matters. Quickly kicking her knees apart, I shove my boot between her thighs against her core.

“You want to come again?”

She bobs up and down on my dick, nodding her head.

“Then grind your pussy on my boot and make us both come.”

That sets her off with renewed vigor, bottoming out to the base. Her hips grind down against my boot at the same speed she's keeping with her mouth. My balls tighten, the pleasure from her finger massaging my taint, and her lips wrapped around me catapult me over the edge. I surge forward, spilling down her throat and onto her tongue. Her hips move erratically, and I know she's found her release with me.

The blaring of the elevator's emergency alarm filters back in. No doubt, it's already sent a notification to the building's managing staff. I quickly get myself situated and hold a hand out for Keira to climb up from the floor.

After hitting the stop button back into place, the elevator lurches into motion. I'll have to get into the building's computer system and scrub the last ten minutes from the hard drive and cloud storage.

The ride up to our floor is quiet but settled. Keira's drained the uneasy, anxious air from the room, and the knot in my chest, tied directly to her happiness, loosens.

"I'm going to draw a bath. Join me?" she asks when we step through the front door.

Dropping a kiss on her forehead, I answer, "I have some work to do. You get started."

"Keira, your phone," I yell from the kitchen. She's somewhere around the apartment since her phone is vibrating on the kitchen island. "Keira," I yell louder when she doesn't answer.

Our food simmers on the stove, minutes away from being done, so I pick up the obnoxious device rattling about.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is Keira Fitzpatrick available?"

“To whom am I speaking?”

“This is a personal matter, sir. I’m unable to provide that information. Is Ms. Fitzpatrick available?”

I pull the phone away from my ear, staring at the number with no name on the caller ID.

“Just a moment.”

Conveniently, Keira chooses that moment to come down the hall. She smiles when she sees me, and her eyebrow quirks in question.

Offering her the phone, I say, “Some man’s calling you. It’s personal, he says.”

That confusion grows more profound in her brows as she brings the cell to her ear. “Uhm, hello?”

I wish she’d put the damn thing on speaker so I could listen in, but I hang on to her responses, trying to piece it together.

“Yes, that’s me.” She pauses, letting the conversation continue on the other line. “Yes, I can make that work.”

Make what work?

“Yes, sir. Nine am on Thursday. I will see you then. Is there anything I need to bring or do to prepare?”

She listens for a little longer before giving him a pleasant sign-off.

“I’m starving, and it smells delicious in here. What are we having?”

I stay planted at the end of the island, arms crossed, as she bounces up to me. “Are you going to tell me what that was all about?”

“Hmm. It’s personal,” Keira states with mock seriousness.

Shaking my head, I snatch her waist and pull her into my chest. “Baby, there is nothing too personal that you can keep from me.”

Her arms snake around my neck, her soft body shifting further into me. I know she's up to something when those golden eyes light with a menacing tell.

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree on this one,” she says confidently before popping up on her toes to press a kiss to my lips. “Now, back to the food.”

“Keira.”

“Yes.”

“Phone call.”

“It’s really bothering you not knowing, isn’t it?”

“Are you pushing for a punishment? Because if you’d like to sit for whatever this appointment is you have coming up, I recommend you start talking, sweetness.”

Her body shivers and those playful eyes turn dark. It’s exactly what she’s gunning for, but she’s getting in over her head, thinking it’ll turn into something pleasure-inducing. We’re locked in a stare-down, my fingers digging into her hips, refusing to let her squirm her way free. The beginning scent of burning sauce hits my nose and

gives me the way to break her.

“You’ve got about ten seconds until the food becomes inedible. And I’m not letting you go until you tell me.”

Her eyes jerk to the saucepan on the stove and back to me. “Fine, fine! Go save it, and I’ll tell you.”

Narrowing my eyes down at her, I slowly loosen my tight hold. She springs back, shoving my body toward the food.

“That was the doctor scheduling the appointment to discuss the procedure.” She stops, grabbing the plates from the cabinet. “Maybe this isn’t the right time to do this with everything happening. You’ve seen the statistics on recovery time. How can we deal with Domenico if I’m weak and can’t handle myself?”

After everything, Keira’s selfless desire to help her niece is the last thing I want her worrying about becoming an issue. With the food done, I turn off the burner, moving the pan to the opposite side.

“Listen to me. The shit with Domenico and my father isn’t your problem. You stepping up and agreeing to the meeting might not even guarantee he lets him go. I wouldn’t put it past him to go against his word. He isn’t exactly giving off the most trustworthy vibes. And we still don’t know what his plan is.”

“But if he?—”

I cut her off, grabbing her hips and lifting her onto the kitchen counter. “But nothing. You want to do the procedure, or you wouldn’t have offered and spent countless hours researching the positive outcome for the patients. Don’t let the bad and unknown take away from doing something life-changing for someone you care

about.”

“I don’t even know her.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I add, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “And you know it.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

KEIRA

DISCO - Nessa Barrett, Tommy Genesis

The sterile white office is more unsettling than being shoved in the back of a van at gunpoint. It smells of disinfectant and cheap perfume that wafts behind the receptionist as she leads us to the doctor's office. The chair is uncomfortable, and I shift back and forth, trying to settle in before the doctor arrives. Harkin's hand lands on my knee.

"Why are you so nervous?"

"That obvious, huh?" I huff out.

"The only time I ever see you this unsettled is when my head's between your thighs teasing your delicious cunt."

"Harkin!" I admonish, looking around the office for the camera.

"Just trying to break some of the tension." He laughs.

Before I can scold him for his help, the office door opens, and a plump older gentleman in a traditional white lab coat steps in. "Ms. Fitzpatrick, I apologize for running a bit behind. I hope you haven't been waiting too long. Can I get you something to drink?" he asks, pointing at the small fridge beside his desk.

“No, thank you.”

“Alright. Let’s get down to business then, shall we?” he asks, sitting behind his well-organized desk.

We go over the surgery that will have me under anesthesia, the risks to me, and the benefits it could mean for my niece. He’s familiar with her case, and shockingly, Alina has permitted him to discuss her prognosis with us. I ask the obnoxiously long list of questions I’ve had saved in my phone for weeks, which includes how quickly I’ll feel like myself again. After signing some paperwork and looking at his calendar, we schedule the procedure for two weeks from today.

“Do you feel better now?” Harkin asks as we sit down at the restaurant for a late lunch.

“About the surgery, yes. I just wish Domenico would reach out and let us know when the damn meeting is supposed to be. Patrick told us he already set it, so what’s taking him so long?”

“Maybe he’s keeping you out of it?”

I shoot daggers in his direction. We both know that won’t be the case. Plus, now that I’ve met Patrick, I’m more curious to see how he reacts when introduced to his granddaughters. Will he let on that we’re already acquainted, or will he play it calm and collected?

The server halts our conversation to take our orders. The restaurant is quiet, with only a handful of patrons taking up booths around the ample space. When she retreats toward the kitchen, I continue.

“Patrick was tight-lipped about the whole meeting but wouldn’t shut up when it came

to my mom. That man gave me whiplash.”

“I suspect he was trying to gain your confidence and see if you knew anything about Domenico. Maybe suss out if you were spying for him.”

“How wrong he’d be, then.”

Our food arrives, and I take advantage of the distraction. I let my mind wander, wondering why these men don’t handle their shit head-on. Why all the games and back and forth, using women to gain a foothold? Then again, they’re kings of their own making, fighting over pieces on the map. Maybe using women is right on the mark, after all.

“You know, there was something you said during the meeting that I haven’t been able to get out of my head,” he says, breaking through my haze.

“What was it?”

“That you don’t want kids.”

His statement catches me off guard. The subject of kids has never come up between us, other than the possibility that he may have had one with my lovely sister. I choke on my half-swallowed bite of salad.

“Uhh, yeah. I mean, I can’t imagine having kids. A year ago, I was living in a shitty apartment, working a dead-end job, stalking a man I’d been watching online for so long I’d fallen in love with him, and that was bad enough. Now, well, shit. Life’s even more fucked up and messy. I’m nowhere near happy, healthy, or stable enough to bring a child into this world. Especially when there’s a possibility I could end up as my mother did.”

Harkin's fork clatters loudly onto his plate. "What happened to your mother will never happen to you. Do you understand me?"

My eyes soften at his declaration. "You don't know that. The world is a cruel and unforgiving place. We can only do our best to survive against the odds. What right do I have bringing a child into it?"

The air around him shifts as he watches me intently, taking in the sentiment of what I've just said. It seems this topic isn't as cut and dry for Harkin as it is for me. He's never once let on that kids between us was something on his mind.

He's enough for me, but does he feel the same?

My phone vibrates, startling me from my morose question. Pulling it free from my back pocket, I don't recognize the number but answer anyway.

"Hello?"

"Hello, mio cuore."

"Domenico."

"Are you ready to earn your boyfriend's father's freedom?"

"When?" I keep it short, my tone stiff with indifference.

"Saturday. Noon. The pub at pier eighty-three. Don't be late, and bring your lapdog."

The line goes dead before I can confirm our attendance.

"Looks like we have a meeting to attend this Saturday. Think he'll bring your

father?” I ask Harkin.

“I don’t believe a word that comes out of that man’s mouth at this rate. I’m not even banking on the fact that he’s alive anymore.”

I hate that it’s a possibility. Not that what happened to Harkin’s father falls on us in the slightest. He got himself and his business into this mess long before pulling us in to save his ass. Even if he is alive and Domenico hands him over, he’s still wanted for his white-collar crimes. After his experience being held by Domenico and tortured by his men, he’d probably look forward to a minimum-security prison.

“Speaking of your family, have you checked on your mom lately? How’s she doing?”

“There’s no contact with the patients for the first sixty days. Her doctor says she’s sober, but it’s been rough. I think the psychiatrist is working overtime to sort through everything with her. I hope it sticks, but at the same time, it’s not like she can be completely truthful about everything.”

“If he walks away from this, what do you think they’ll do?” I ask, genuinely curious about how the other half deals with their issues.

“Disappear to a country somewhere with no extradition treaty with the US. Would he bother with my mom? Fuck if I know.”

“Can I get you guys anything else?” the waitress interrupts.

“No, thank you. Just the check, please.”

Harkin doesn’t wait for the waitress to return, dropping a stack of bills on the table. “I don’t want to worry about any of that right now. We have bigger things on our plate.”

It's an odd feeling living life day-to-day without much of a purpose. There's no more work, no running errands—shit, I don't even clean the apartment. Now that we're back in the city, Harkin's fallen into his norm. Things seem to get done, and I'm pulling out my hair from boredom. There's only so much working out and scrolling through socials a girl can do. I feel more cooped up here in the city than I did in hiding in Colorado.

The meeting is in forty-eight hours. Harkin and James have hardly come up for air. I gave up trying to piece together what Domenico might drop on us there. Even our best guess could still be wrong. What's the point of wasting energy just to chase our tails?

I run my fingers through Cinder's thick fur as we sit on the couch and watch the drizzly day from our glass box.

"You know, I never thought I'd want to leave the city, but I miss the mountains. I bet you do, too." I give her an extra scratch behind the ears. Unfolding my legs from under me, I stand and walk to the windows overlooking the street below.

People mill about below, moving from one thing to another. I'm jealous of their ability to do so freely. I'm sure they're all saddled with mundane worries, like what to make for dinner or how to pay that overdue bill. I suppose in that way, I'm lucky. Even without a job, money hasn't crossed my mind.

I've somehow become a kept woman without realizing it. That thought alone shocks me into a mental spiral. One so deep I don't hear his footsteps approach. When strong arms band around my waist, and a scratchy chin settles in the crook of my neck, he pulls me into his hard chest.

"There you are," he says softly.

I let out a huff of laughter. “Where else would I be?”

He must hear the tinge of annoyance in my words. I’m spun quickly and pushed against the cool glass. “What do you mean by that, sweetness?”

His eyes fill with concern, and that’s the last thing we need when everything else is concerning on a nuclear level.

“It’s nothing important.”

“Everything about you is important to me. Spit it out.”

“I’m dying.”

At my statement, his eyebrows crease. Words pursed at the tip of his tongue as his mouth falls open.

“Of boredom, Harkin. I’m tired of being stuck inside. Of having nothing to do.”

He studies me before saying, “You want out of the apartment.”

“I don’t think your leash would let me get very far.”

His lips quirk into a playful smile. “While that image is extremely tempting, I think we can figure something out. If it was a year ago before we met and all this wasn’t spinning in your orbit, what would you have done to blow off some steam?”

A time before Harkin isn’t one I tend to rekindle. Because even a year ago, before we’d officially met, he was still in my life. Thinking about his question, it dawns on me. “Live music,” I tell him.

A memory of Harkin storming into the dive bar to play protector pulls to the forefront of my mind. That night changed everything for us. If it wasn't for a drunken call and a man who couldn't let shit go, we might not be here today.

“With Stacey and lots of alcohol,” I finish up.

“I think I might regret this,” he says before yelling, “James” out into the apartment.

Heavy footfalls speed down the hall until James enters the living room.

“What?” he asks, ready to dive headfirst into whatever trouble has popped up in the last ten minutes since Harkin left him.

“Call Stacey. We're taking the girls out tonight.”

TWENTY-NINE

HARKIN

In The Dark - Breaker

Gypsy's is packed full, and the noise of the bar immediately puts my back up as soon as we step inside. James said they'd meet us here after he tried to dissuade me from the outing. But Keira was too excited, and the moment she texted Stacey, there was no way he was getting out of it.

"Do you see them anywhere?" I yell in Keira's ear as I push her past the groups of people surrounding the few tables at the back.

"There!" She points toward the bar.

The two of them aren't hard to miss. Stacey doesn't fit in at the dive rock bar with her outfit that screams I should be uptown at a swanky hotel top bar. Then there's James, with his stiff posture and crossed arms. He looks like he should be guarding the door or a princess. I suppose, in a way, he is.

Keira reaches for Stacey's shoulder, and they squeal as if they didn't see each other yesterday. James acknowledges me with our typical greeting. They already have their drinks, so I head to the bar and flag down the bartender.

I wasn't sure if John was still working here, but when he turns in my direction, the fucker lights up at seeing me. "Hey, man, long time."

“Yeah, that one’s been keeping me busy.”

“Damn, is that the same girl you were here with last time I saw you?”

“Shocking, I know.”

“Fuck, you can say that again.” He laughs. “What can I make for you?”

“Jack and Coke and a bottle of water.”

He hands our drinks over quickly, and I slide my card to him, leaving a tab open for Keira. The group moved closer to the stage, but as the break between bands dragged on, the crowd started to thin out, which made it easier for me to get back. The house music played through the speakers, but it felt much quieter compared to the energy of a live performance.

“Here you go, sweetness.”

She takes a swig of the dark, bubbling liquid, and her eyes widen. “Actually letting the reins loose for the night?”

“Loose, but not completely off. Understood?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

Her body presses closer as she leans up on her toes to whisper in my ear. “Are you sure? I was hoping to reenact our last time here. I’m sure the office is free, or we could try the bathroom this time.”

I snort out a huff of laughter. “Let’s see how the night goes.”

Slinking back to Stacey’s side, she keeps her eyes on me as they return to their conversation.

“You might have been right,” James says.

“I’m right about a lot of things. You’ll need to be more specific.”

He shoots me an unimpressed look. “About coming out. I think Stacey needed it, too.”

“Are you ever going to admit to me that there’s more than just a hook-up happening between you two?”

His eyes shift to the woman in question, who’s cackling at something Keira said. “It’s about to become much more than that,” he says ominously.

Before I can hound him further, the mic cracks, and the lead singer of the next band introduces themselves to the crowd. They’re an interesting mix of metal and EDM, but not too hard on the ears. The girls ditch us, shoving through the rowdy crowd to a spot in the middle.

We have a harder time making it through the throngs of jumping people, and I can see the irritation in my friend rising. When we find the girls, they’re both pulled in close, keeping them out of reach of any drunk wandering hands.

Keira’s body jostling against me, paired with her earlier comment, makes my dick thicken. Images of her shoved against a graffiti-covered bathroom stall, coming all over my cock, doesn’t help my predicament. I bat them away, trying to focus on the music. This night is for her to relax and let loose with Stacey. But a man can only do so much when his body automatically reacts to the goddess in his arms.

She eventually notices, turning around in my arms and throwing hers around my neck. “Are you going to keep teasing me all night, or are you going to take me somewhere to fuck me?”

Her brazen attitude has everything to do with the fact that we're in public, and she's had more to drink tonight than she has in months. I wonder how she'd react if I let her continue this little power trip.

"You want me to treat you like an easy whore and fuck you in the bathroom, little one?"

At the offer, her eyes bore into mine. That plump bottom lip catches between her teeth after her tongue drags along it. The crowd is thick, the music drowning out their existence. My fingers close around her exposed waist, pulling her into my chest. My other hand squeezes between us, shoving down the front of her jeans. Those lust-filled orbs grow wide at the unexpected intrusion, not that she minds.

She's bare beneath my fingers, her cunt wet and ready for my cock. I told myself it was just to see before I dragged her away to find a quieter place where we could have a few minutes alone, but I sink two fingers into her. She perks onto her toes, shoving into me and dropping a moan next to my ear.

"Harkin, please."

"Please, what, sweetness?"

"Please take me somewhere and fuck me hard."

My chest bounces with a chuckle. I rip my hand free from its warm confines, looking between us to ensure everything's in place. I nudge James and let him know we'll return soon. He just shakes his head, knowing damn well we're not looking for another round of drinks.

I drag Keira behind me, heading down the dark hall that houses the office we christened last time. Instead of turning right into the women's restroom, we slip up

the back stairwell used for the lighting and sound crews on the upper balcony of the bar.

“Harkin, where are we going?” Keira calls behind me.

“We’re almost there,” I shout back, but I don’t know if she can hear me over the thudding of the drums.

I find what I’m looking for at the end of the narrow hallway: the bright red emergency sign above a secluded door. Thankfully, it’s unlocked, and when I push it open to step through, the metal of the fire escape creaks under me. These things have always seemed untrustworthy, but I know the city has strict regulations on them for businesses.

“Harkin, what the hell are we doing out here?” Keira asks, following me onto the narrow platform.

“You know I’m a possessive man, little one. Did you think I’d let a crowd of drunk bargoers hear your cries of pleasure?” I ask, pushing her back against the metal door as soon as it slips shut.

“And you think out here, where anyone could see us instead of in a closed stall, is better?”

I turn my head left. The only thing in that direction is the closed-off brick walls of an alleyway, with trash collecting in the bar’s bins below. To the right, the street bustles with foot traffic and the occasional taxi, but everyone is too busy moving about their night. They don’t take the time to look down the shadowed passageway.

“I like my chances,” I say with a grin, popping the button of her jeans.

My fingers return to her heat that's still wet with her desire. Our exposure's forgotten the second my thumb circles her clit. A keening groan echoes across the night, and I want to hear her scream so loud she drowns out the music pumping inside.

"How long do you think we have until Stacey starts looking for you?"

"Ten minutes, max."

I'll have her falling apart in eight. "Boot off, pants down."

Her eyes grow wide, but she shoves me away to give her space to strip down. It would have been a great night for her to wear a skirt, but I won't let her wardrobe dictate our ability to fuck. She toes off her boot, kicking it out of the way, but not too far that it's in danger of falling to the ground below. As she shoves her jeans to her ankles and steps out of one side, my mouth waters to taste her sweet cunt. That'll have to wait until we get home, when I can give her all the time and attention she deserves.

"No panties, huh? It seems like someone had plans before we even left the house."

"A girl can dream. Or manipulate," she whispers with a wicked smile.

When my jeans are unbuttoned, and my cock is free, she doesn't wait, wrapping her leg around my waist to bring us together, and I sink home.

I capture her cries of pleasure, melding our lips together in a searing kiss. The fire escape creaks and groans under the jostling of our weight as I slam into her perfect cunt. The chilly night air brushes against my heated flesh, but it does nothing when her hot pussy's wrapped around my cock.

"Fuck, little one. Dripping all over for me."

Her cunt pulses at my words, and my balls tighten at the sign of her incoming orgasm. I reach between our bodies, my fingers gliding against her swollen clit. Her head hits the metal door with a thud at the added sensation. Even in the dark, I can see the racing pulse at her neck as we hurdle toward the finish line.

My fingers work in tandem with the rhythm of my hips snapping into her core. She's so close to drenching my cock. The instant my teeth scrape against the sensitive flesh on her neck and dig in, she explodes, screaming her release into the dark abyss around us. She slumps into my arms, and my thrusts pick up speed, joining her on the other side.

Slipping free, my cum spills down her leg. I trace the mess back up her soft thigh, shoving my coated fingers back into her pussy. She twitches against intrusion, but sinks her hips further onto me.

"More," she cries desperately.

I yank my fingers free of her needy cunt and give it a slap for good measure. My fingertips touch against her lips, and she sucks them clean eagerly while moaning at the taste of our combined release.

"You'll get more later." I wink and releasing her leg from my hip and moving to grab her forgotten boot. "Let's go before they send out the calvary."

She stumbles behind me, drunk on pleasure and the waning alcohol in her bloodstream. We make our way back down the narrow staircase leading to the bar's main floor. The band's closing out another song. I check my watch and notice we were only gone for fifteen minutes, easily justifiable by a long bathroom line. It lights up anyway with a text notification from James. I could use another drink, and I'm sure Keira could too, but I don't want him to start a scene, so I shoot off a quick text and pull my girl toward the bar.

“There you are!” Stacey’s voice breaks through the crowd while we wait.

Keira turns to her friend, and the evidence of our disappearance must be evident because Stacey bursts out in a boisterous laughter that battles the band for attention.

“You two are worse than rabbits, I fucking swear,” I hear her yell.

Nothing wrong with that. I think to myself.

We down another round, listen to the last few songs the band covers and head out. We all made it through a night out without the world crashing around us. It’s the calm before the storm; soon, all hell will break loose.

THIRTY

KEIRA

Daddy Issues (Remix) - The Neighborhood, Syd

Tomorrow is the day everything hinges on. The last year of pandemonium all wrapped up in one little family reunion. If only I could sit this one out. Nervous energy hums steadily through my veins, no matter what I do to try to quell it. It's not only the meeting itself, but what comes after. We have no clue what Domenico is after. This could be the first in a long line of shit kicked our way, and that's without Patrick's involvement.

My muscles tense the longer I sit in the middle of my yoga mat—another idea to try to relax my racing mind. Anyone who tries to tell you meditation is the perfect way to settle the mind has never had the shit I'm dealing with on their plate.

I throw up my hands and sigh in defeat. Opening my eyes, they land on a very entertained Harkin, watching me untangle my limbs to stand. My feet are half asleep from being in one position for too long, and I hobble over to where he sits on the chest press bench.

“When did you come in here? I didn't hear you.”

“About ten minutes ago,” he answers with a soft smile.

“Shit, maybe the meditation was doing something, then.”

“Still in your head about tomorrow?” he asks, lifting a finger to push an escaped strand of hair behind my ear.

“I just want it to be over and done with. I hate not knowing the most. When we can handle whatever it is Dom’s after, I’ll feel better.”

“Me too, sweetness. But until then, I need you to come to my office so we can go over the plan for tomorrow with James.”

Tangling his fingers in my messy bun, he pulls my lips to his. He doesn’t linger, but it’s more settling than anything I’ve tried in the last hour.

“I don’t know what you two think we can plan for. The way I see it, if this doesn’t end in some old western shoot-out and we walk away without any new holes in our bodies, I’ll call it a win.” I tell them and drop into one of the chairs in front of Harkin’s desk.

James leans against the massive bookshelves, his arms crossed tightly against his chest. He doesn’t respond, but the look he shoots me tells me he has some opinions on my assessment.

“We’re doing what we can to ensure we walk out of that pub in one piece.”

“So, extra guys around the building. How many do you think can find hiding places between the three of us all having them on standby? Having those two in one place is the NYPD’s wet dream.”

“You’re not wrong there.” James finally speaks. “I’m confident the building will be surrounded, likely the rooftops too. Plus, Domenico's security will consider any quick escape. But this place is in Patrick’s pocket. It’s his home turf. I’m shocked he got your father to agree to meet him there.”

“Don’t call him that.”

“You can try to deny it all you want, Keira, but you’re a Morelli by blood. That shit isn’t going away,” James chides.

“Don’t forget my other half,” I remind him sarcastically, as if any of us could. “So, what I’m hearing is we show up and hope for the best. Great plan.” I huff and pop up from my chair, heading for the office door. There goes the last hour of trying to shut down the possibilities running through my mind. Maybe I can convince Harkin to fuck me senseless.

I leave them to their plans, escaping into the quiet of our bedroom. My body hits the mattress with a bounce, and I sink into the blankets, wishing they’d swallow me whole and deposit me into a new reality.

This is ridiculous. This sullen feeling sorry for myself and the situation is annoying even me. “Ugh!” I huff into the comforter, vocalizing my frustration.

My thigh starts to vibrate, and I reach into the pocket of my leggings to snag my phone free. The phone continues, letting me know it’s a call, not a text. Stacey’s beautiful face shows on the screen.

“Where are you?” I ask by way of greeting my best friend.

“I’m glad you asked, because I need you to come here now.” There’s worry deep in her tone.

I push off the mattress, sit up, and look around, making sure I can’t hear the guys from here. “What’s going on? Tell me where you are right now. Should I tell James?”

“God, no. Don’t tell him. Just come. I’m at home. I fucked up, Keira.” She pauses.

“So, fucked,” she whispers, but it’s more to herself than me.

I stay on the line, quietly pulling my shoes on and stepping out into the hall. I can hear Harkin and James in the office, and I creep in the opposite direction toward the front door. There’s no reason for the theatrics. He’ll know when I open the front door and race for the elevator. I’ll be lucky to make it on before he’s after me. But this is my best friend, and I’ll deal with his ire when I get back or, more likely, when he catches up.

“Okay, I’m coming! I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I hang up the phone, and the elevator dings.

“Keira!” he roars down the hallway, but the elevator doors close on his arrival. Something slams against the other side; if I had to guess, it’s his fist.

My intention isn’t to make him worry, but her adamant refusal to let James come with me is concerning. Would Harkin keep it from him if I ask? He once said something that makes me think he wouldn’t.

I shoot him off a text anyway.

I’m not running into trouble. I’ll be safe. And you know how to find me. Please don’t be mad.

His reply is almost instant.

Get your ass back here right now, Keira. You know I’m right behind you, and when I get to you, sweetness, that idea of chaining you to me looks more like your reality.

I can’t help the chuckle that falls from my lips. He threatens that like it’s a bad thing. I race through the building’s front door and down the steps to the sidewalk. I won’t

chance the subway, but I also need to get away from our building as soon as possible before I'm accosted on foot.

It must be my lucky day, because a woman climbs from a taxi to my left. I wait until she moves away from the door and hop in, slamming it behind me. The cabbie jumps when I shout the address a little louder than necessary in my haste to get moving.

A hand slaps against the door, but we're pulling away from the curb, and it doesn't give Harkin enough time to grab the handle and stop us. My eyes lock with his through the window, and instead of the fury I expect, I see so much hurt that my stomach churns with guilt and despair.

My phone dings again in my hands. The unexpected noise pulls my eyes from the window into my lap.

Why?

The one word settles like stones in my gut. I just hope whatever is going on with Stacey is worth the trouble this little escape will cause.

My rushed footsteps echo off the narrow hallway as I finally reach Stacey's front door. Shoving my key into the lock, I swing the door open and slam it behind me, not trying to hide my arrival.

"Stacey!" I yell, not seeing her in the kitchen or living room as I walk into the open space.

She doesn't answer, and I can't hear anything else in the apartment. It's quiet. Too quiet. She must be here. There's no way she'd tell me to rush over, then pick up and leave. I slam to a halt at her bedroom door, scanning the messy room for the blonde bombshell.

My eyes land on the en suite bathroom door cracked open. Soft whimpers break past my heavy breaths, pushing me forward hesitantly.

“Stace? Babe, I’m here,” I call out again, a little softer, feeling the energy shift as I push the door open.

My beautiful best friend is a heap on the floor, her back against the giant self-standing bathtub, hands in her hair pulling at the roots. Red-rimmed eyes lift and meet mine in the doorway.

“Keira,” she calls out on a choked sob.

I move on instinct, falling by her side on the floor and drag her into me. It’s a ridiculous sight with my tiny body holding her lengthy one, but she collapses against me the second my arms wrap around her shoulders.

“What the actual hell is going on?” I ask as soon as her breathing comes under control.

“I fucked up. He’s going to kill me.”

“First off, no one’s going to kill you. They’ll have to go through me first. But you have to give me more than that, babe. What’s going on?”

Her hand disappears into her lap, and a little white stick pulls free. She rests it on her knees between us.

“Oh,” I say, shocked. The “shit” that comes next is only mouthed because I know she doesn’t need to hear it from me when her mind’s already there.

“This is why you didn’t want me to tell him.”

She nods, resting her head on her arms wrapped around her knees. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I’m too young. Life’s too crazy. And he’s—Well, he’s James. We’re not even dating,” she rambles, getting the jumbled thoughts in her mind out.

“Uhm... does he know you think the two of you aren’t dating? Because he’s like Harkin. He decided you were his the moment you started sleeping together, regardless of if you were on the same page. Also, you should expect both of them to show up at any minute. I kind of left in a hurry and didn’t exactly tell Harkin what I was doing. You know how he is.”

“I can’t deal with him right now. You have to stop him.”

The words fall from her lips, and at the same time, a pounding starts at the other end of the apartment.

“He doesn’t have a key?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

Her broken laughter lightens the mood slightly between us. “Not from me. But I wouldn’t be surprised if he has one tucked away. He’s just smart enough not to use it right now.”

Interesting. Locked door or not, it’s not likely to keep Harkin out for much longer. I can guess the only reason the door’s still on its hinges is because it’s Stacey’s place.

I jump to my feet, looking down at the devastation written all over her puffy face. “If I open that door, you know I can’t keep him away from you without bodily harm to both of us. I’m willing to try, though. For you, I’d do that.”

“You’re so stupid.” She laughs, grabbing the pregnancy test and reaching her hands up for me to help her off the ground.

I leave the one with her pee stick free and heft her into my arms for one last quick squeeze before heading out to the front door. Stace stays behind in her bedroom, safe for a few moments longer.

The guys tumble in through the front door as soon as I pull it open. Harkin's eyes find mine, taking stock of my body from head to toe. A quick flash of relief passes before they tighten with anger. I ignore the man plotting my ways of punishment and grab James's arm in a tight squeeze before he can push past me to look for Stacey.

"If you hurt her, I will kill you, and I'll use those family connections to hide your body."

His eyebrows pull down in confusion, but he quickly nods before shaking me off. Then he disappears down the hall, and I draw in a deep, calming breath before turning to my own raging bull.

"I'm sorry," I throw out before he can reprimand me. I wait on bated breath for his ire to come. Instead, strong arms pull me tightly to his chest.

"I should paddle your ass black and blue, sweetness," he whispers into my hair. "But I know she needed you."

I shove against him so there's enough space for me to look up into his softened gaze. "You do?"

"James told me."

"Wait? How does he know? She literally just found out."

"Sweetness, you think I wouldn't know the moment your cycle was late?"

“Jesus Christ! I can’t with you two.” I laugh, shaking my head.

THIRTY-ONE

HARKIN

Play Dirty - Kevin McAlister, [SEBELL]

The air in the pub buzzes with barely held-back animosity between the two men sitting across from each other. Keira watches the two braced in a stand-off while I watch her relax into a position of amusement at the scene unfolding.

I clear my throat. “Well, as riveting as this little staring contest is, can we get down to business, or do you two need a dual to settle things before we can move forward.”

Domenico’s mouth pops open to spout something at me, surely about my smart mouth, but Patrick steps in, taking the limelight. Keira’s cheek pops with a suppressed laugh when he gnashes his teeth together with a click.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t shoot you right now and walk away from this with my granddaughters in tow?” Patrick asks the man responsible for his daughter’s demise by association.

“What happened to Claire was a heinous act on my uncle’s part. It’s why I put a bullet in his skull the moment I found out.”

Patrick’s indignant scoff gains him a curious glance from my girl. Alina straightens across from us, tucking her phone away for the first time since we sat down upon everyone’s arrival.

“Don’t try to make it sound like it was some sort of vigilante justice and not a self-satisfying grab for power.”

“Two birds, one stone.” He shrugs.

“Alright, we get it. There’s bad blood between all of us, yet here we are. Can we get to the fucking point?” Keira breaks into the conversation, sharing our mutual opinion.

Alina’s sneer at her sister goes unnoticed by everyone but me. She must hate the attention Keira garners from both her father and grandfather. Alina will never be the one Domenico looks to for anything more than a bargaining chip. Keira’s skilled and has a backbone that she’s shown him repeatedly. While he may hate it, at least he respects her to some level. Alina’s a pretty face to be married off for alliances. Keira is the heir he’ll never possess.

“I need protected access to the port,” he finally announces.

“Why would I allow that? You have no sway with me.”

Domenico is the little fish in Patrick’s sea—a king amongst his own men, but a peasant to the man across from him.

“How about a cool ten million for a single night of work? All you have to do is allow my contact access to your slot at the docks.”

Patrick sits back in his chair, fingers steepled against his thick beard. The shift in his demeanor is telling. He’s on the line and waiting to be convinced.

“If this is a business meeting, I’m not sure what this has to do with us or why you think we’d care?” Keira confronts her father.

She's made it clear she has zero interest in working for her father or getting involved in the family business. If it weren't for my own family, we wouldn't be here.

His menacing gaze turns in our direction. "You, my dear, have your part to play, as does he," he finishes with a tilt of his head in my direction.

Interesting. Domenico's inability to not make a game out of everything grinds my gears. "Spit it out, then," I bite out.

His unimpressed gaze flicks to me before slowly peeling back to his daughter. "You two will plan a path from the docks to the drop-off location, ensuring we're not delayed or intercepted, and in return, I'll let your father go."

"Breaking your word hardly seems like motivation to do anything for you," Keira spits. "You said Mr. Greyson would be released back to us for attending this meeting with you. Now you're shifting things. Why would we believe anything you say, including the payout you're promising Patrick." She motions to her grandfather.

"She has a point, Domenico. A man's word is all he has in this world. I don't work with liars." Patrick pushes away from the table, looking between the twins.

"Reach out if you ever need me," he offers and turns on his heels.

Domenico's quick to his feet, the chair he was using clattering to the floor. "I am a man of my word; this was your father's idea, Harkin. He's very aware of how generous I've been with him."

Patrick stops and turns back in our direction but doesn't move to rejoin us.

I scoff loudly. "Generous. The last time I checked, generosity included donating to charity, not removing fingers with a guillotine, and then sending those fingers to an

unsuspecting wife.”

“He didn’t get a bullet to the head when my men found him. That is generosity in our world, boy.”

A firm touch wraps around my knee, squeezing tightly. The contact grounds my surging rage toward her father. Keira doesn’t move from her otherwise relaxed position, playing the mob princess flawlessly. Yet, her energy flows through our connection, and I know she’s holding firm for her own good, too.

“My father’s plan. Do explain,” I respond, now calm and collected.

“We’ve already established your father owes me. But he also has a pesky problem with the authorities at the moment. I have it in good faith from a trusted source that this could all disappear with a single phone call to the right person.”

I have no words for the diabolical man in front of me. James was right. Domenico’s been pulling the strings all along. The business accusations hitting the news at the same time my father went missing was his way of covering his tracks. A man like my father vanishing into thin air doesn’t go unnoticed.

“We want proof of life before we’ll even consider your offer,” Keira tells him.

Domenico reaches into his breast pocket, plucking a phone from its depths before tapping away. The phone slides across the table, and Keira snatches it before it can fall over the edge.

“I thought you might say that. There’s your proof. As you can see, he’s tucked away for safekeeping.”

“Turn it up,” I tell her.

Keira's finger slips to the side, jamming the volume all the way up.

My father looks nothing like the man I know. His hair is overgrown and riddled with grease. The clean-shaven, sharp jawline I inherited is covered in a salt-and-pepper beard. His face is sallow and bruised, eyes sunken from malnutrition during his captivity. A raspy, defeated tone fills the quiet pub from the speaker.

"Harkin, I know you must have a million questions, but I need you to do this for me, son. Do as Mr. Morelli asks. You're the right person to get this job done, and then we can move on from this."

The video cuts off, and the screen goes black. I want to chuck the device, letting it smash into a million tiny pieces while I pull my pistol from its holster and pepper his body with bullets. He broke the once pompous man of standing into a pathetic, sniveling mess, willing to beg the son who can't stand him for help. But something deep down refuses to let me walk away and let him suffer his own consequences. I suppose that's the difference between us at the end of the day.

"Drop me his location pin, and I'll help you. You have my word; I won't make a move to recover him until the job is complete. Take it or leave it," I offer, standing from my seat.

Keira's quick to join me, stealing the phone from my fingers. She drops it unceremoniously across the table in front of her father.

"Do it, Domenico. We're a packaged deal. If you want this job to go down successfully, I highly recommend you do as he says."

My girl rounds the table, leaving before he can answer her ultimatum. Her steady strides deposit her in front of Patrick, who leans against a bar table, taking everything in. The calculating prodigy leans up and kisses her grandfather's cheek. If Domenico

thought he had a hand up in the situation, dangle the girls in front of Patrick, Keira's just wiped his ass off the board.

"I expect we'll be hearing from both of them," I whisper in her ear, her lithe body tucked into my side as we exit the pub onto the boardwalk.

"One step closer to putting this shitshow behind us."

"You realize this will make us accessories to his crimes. Whatever this shipment is, it won't be good if we're caught."

"We won't get caught," she says, matter of fact. "He wants a planned route. We don't have to be there. We're not driving it. We'll get it done, send it over, and once his truck of God only knows what it's transported, we collect your father."

"I don't know. It seems too easy. Why all the fuss? Why the meeting with all of us? Ten million on the table is enough incentive, even for a man like Patrick."

We make it away from the building without being interrupted. The horn from the blacked-out SUV sounds, pulling our attention from the conversation. James is waiting for us a few cars back.

"It's Domenico. He had to have thought he'd have more pull with Alina and me there. He was counting on Patrick having a soft spot for us. I don't think he was wrong, per se, but he underestimated the job he was bringing to the table."

"You're right. Patrick was curious."

"Do you know anything about who your father's contact might be? What this could be about?"

“No. But the best thing about my father's system for his business and communication is that I built it. And I made it with a backdoor.”

THIRTY-TWO

KEIRA

Madness - Ruelle

Harkin shares the manifest to the TV, enlarging the list to the larger screen so we can all see it. The details he dug up from the last ten years revealed his father's relationship with the person we're assuming is the contact Domenico mentioned. There are no names or indicators of who it is, but we know they work out of Mexico. It doesn't take a genius to know drugs coming from that area are linked to the cartel. This shit just keeps getting worse.

"I can't believe my dad is involved with the cartel," Harkin says, slumping back onto the couch.

We gave up on the office and moved to the living room a couple of hours ago. The couch offers the ability to work off each other's screens while using the TV for anything important. I lean my head on his shoulder, scanning the compiled spreadsheet.

"I mean, is the cartel really any worse than my family's shit? They've all got their grimy hands in something, making this world a worse-off place. At least we haven't stumbled into the skin trade. That's a silver lining."

"I wouldn't be so sure it's not happening. We just haven't caught onto it yet."

“I’d like to remain blissfully unaware of that one if I can,” I tell him.

Drugs, guns, and money laundering are all bad. But at the end of the day, it’s nowhere close to the level of kidnapping and selling women and children. It happens every day. People I knew on the streets disappeared and were never heard from again. Those not already indebted to their dealers were given more rope to lead to their own demise. It’s a fucked-up cycle that keeps the merchandise constant.

“I can’t figure out why they’re bothering with the port. They’ve probably been running with trucks for years, so why the change now?”

“Maybe they had one too many run-ins on their routes. The open water offers a faster route around that?” I say, acting like I know anything about running drugs, aside from what I’ve picked up from TV show dramas.

“Patrick having an in at the docks helps get them imported. But there’s still a whole slew of shit that can go sideways. Unloading the product, getting it across the city without detection, the drop...” Harkin trails off as if his mind is running through all the problems we should account for.

“And that’s why he’s paying us the big bucks, in the form of your father,” I throw it out lightly.

“Are you joking about this?”

But I just shrug, because if I can’t try to make light of this situation, it will drive me crazy. I’m surprised my hair hasn’t fallen out from all the stress this last year has caused. I somehow miss the days when my biggest problem was figuring out where I would lay my head that night or where my next meal would come from. Those were things I could handle. This shit is so much bigger—literal life or death.

“We should finalize the route. I need to send it to Domenico so he can get it to his men.”

Harkin switches the TV screen to the map we’ve outlined. It’s not the fastest route, but it avoids the most points for possible tension. Domenico obviously hadn’t researched the date he chose for the import. Right off the pier, the event space is set for a massive benefit concert. Celebrities, musicians, and the odd local politician are all set to join the festivities. That means the place will be crawling with cops. Then again, maybe it’s the exact sleight of hand we need to pull this off.

“And you’re sure going south is the best option?” I ask him.

“There are fewer cameras going out that way. Plus, it’s the typical route for trucks leaving the docks to hit the expressway. It’d look more conspicuous if they head north straight away.”

“And the cameras that are there?”

“I’ll hack in and scramble them. If you can handle the lights at the same time, it’ll be easier for us to get them through the city and out to the border. Do you think you can handle that, sweetness?”

I throw him an annoyed glare. After everything he’s taught me, lighting the path up green is child’s play. It’s tempting to make the escape route a living hell, cause the whole of NYPD to come down on them, and leave it at that. The problem with that plan is it’d no doubt sign the Greyson patriarch’s death certificate and ours right along with him once the cartel was after us.

“Don’t insult my abilities. You taught me, remember?”

James stomps down the hall, joining us in the living room. He’s been watching both

Domenico and Patrick, ensuring they're both keeping their distance from us. Something's happened. I don't like the look of fierce annoyance on his face.

"What's up with you?" I ask, watching him pull the top off the crystal decanter in the corner.

"You need to call her and talk some sense into her. She's driving me crazy."

The composed demeanor he typically sports slips when he throws back the amber liquid and replenishes his glass. My laptop almost clatters to the floor as I jump off the couch, but Harkin saves it at the last minute. I'm across the room and in his face before he finishes his second glass.

"What did you do to her!" I shout, jamming a finger into his hard chest, looking up at the towering giant of a man.

"Do to her? I've done nothing but protect her, but now that she's carrying my child, she thinks I'm smothering her and overreacting. So help me, Keira, you either talk some sense into her, or I'll force her to go anyway," he threatens, the words clipped.

I have no doubt in my mind he'll make good on his promise, but I'm still not sure what the issue is in the first place.

"What are you talking about?"

"I want her gone. It's not safe here anymore. No offense to you two. I love you like family, Harkin," he throws over my shoulder, "but Stacey and the baby are my highest priority, and I need them away from you both."

I step back, and a gasp leaves my mouth. Away from me? But she's my best friend. If it weren't for me, he wouldn't know her. I'm about to make this exact argument, but

a thick arm wraps around my waist, pulling me back into a hard chest.

“I understand. Keira will talk to her and convince her.” Harkin’s deep voice sounds next to my ear. “Stacey isn’t safe staying here in the city, sweetness,” he whispers for my ears only.

They’re not wrong. We don’t know how this will play out. It could go sideways, and not only would my father be after us again, but we could be putting a target on our backs for an organization much worse. I don’t want her anywhere near this, either.

“Should I go see her?” I look up, finding James’s expected gaze.

“I’ve already had her moved to a safe house in the city. Call her, persuade her to listen to me, and follow my plan. It’s not forever, just until things are handled and everything’s safe.”

Will everything be safe? Can it ever be safe again? Maybe my familial connections are too much for a friendship to bear. It’s not fair to ask that of someone. Especially, when that someone now has their own someone to consider.

“I’ll go call her now.”

I leave the two most overbearing men I’ve ever met in the living room and escape to the bedroom. Stacey picks up the video call on the second ring. Her eyes are puffy and rimmed red again. I don’t love that I keep finding her like this. I can’t blame the girl because she’s had her whole world turned upside down.

“Hey, babes. How are you holding up?” I ask, taking in the unfamiliar background.

“He’s insufferable.”

“Girl, what did you expect? You told the man you were having his baby in the middle of our very own World War III. I’m shocked you’re not on the other side of the world by now.”

“He doesn’t get to tell me what to do, K.”

I try to hold in my laughter at her severe, pissed-off face, but we both know the men we chose to be with.

“Don’t!” she bites out, knowing exactly what I was going to say.

I put up my hands in surrender. “Why such a fight? You don’t need to be here, Stace. This isn’t your shit to get involved with. He’s right to be worried. We both are.”

“Oh my god, he got to you.”

“Listen,” I coax.

“You’re my friend. He doesn’t get to use you against me,” she spits.

“He’s not using me against you, but I love you, and I need to know you’re not going to get dragged into this mess if something goes sideways. Can’t you just let him whisk you away to wherever he wants to hide you for a couple of weeks? Think of it as a vacation. Shit, request a beach somewhere and get a tan.”

“I hate you both.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No. I don’t, but you’re both extremely annoying.”

“I’ll take it as long as you’re safe. Call and tell him so he stops stomping around my living room, throwing back whiskey like it’s water.”

“Fine. But promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“You two won’t leave me raising this baby alone.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” I reassure her, but I’m not convinced that’ll be the case.

She signs off, and two seconds later, the chime of a phone ringing in the other room sounds through the walls. Good, one less thing to worry about. I flop back on the mattress, staring up at the spinning blades of the ceiling fan. The rhythmic rotation lulls me into a trance, and I start to drift off, or maybe I fall asleep because when my phone vibrates on the mattress next to me, I practically jump out of my skin.

The text is from an unknown number.

I KNOW WHAT YOU’RE DOING. I CAN HELP.

What the hell? I sit up, staring at the phone screen like more information will magically pop through. I should run out to the living room and tell Harkin, but something in my gut stops me. It’s probably not the right call. Everything I’ve ever kept from him has made shit worse, yet my body stays glued to the mattress.

Who is this?

I type out with shaking hands.

THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT. WE HAVE THE SAME GOAL. TAKE DOWN DOMENICO MORELLI.

It's a trap. It must be. Who would think to send me this other than Domenico himself? I can't do this. It's not worth the risk. I throw the phone at the pillows, wishing like hell that the text got lost before it landed on my phone.

The what-ifs start the moment the phone bounces away from me. What if it's not a trap? What if someone already knows what we're planning? What if they have a way to get us out of this?

I scramble across the bed and snatch my phone back, the screen still lit up and taunting. I shouldn't. This could make everything worse and negate the promise I just made to Stacey. But my fingers have the words typed out on the screen without my approval, but my thumb hesitates over the send button.

My shoulders rise and fall on a steady breath. And I hit send.

Tell me everything.

THIRTY-THREE

HARKIN

Lifetime - Chris Grey

The water cascades down her body, and steam billows over the fogged-up glass enclosure. Her hands trace against her skin, scrubbing the sweat and cum from it. Mine ache to take their place, but we don't have time for a second round this morning. I lean heavily into the doorjamb, enjoying the view while caffeinating my system to get through the rest of the day. I've been dreading this moment. Stepping into the sterile clinic for her procedure is bound to draw up old memories of the days I was stuck in the hospital after the accident.

Keira's surgery couldn't have been more ill-timed, falling only days before the job. But it gives me a better excuse to keep her from the excitement. If Domenico demands her presence, it's not an option. She'll need to rest, and I'm debating taking the cameras off her plate, even though I know she'll fight me on it. I can do everything on my own with my system, but he wanted her roped in for his sick amusement.

The water cuts off, and she steps out, noticing me for the first time. Her eyebrow quirks and her beautiful face lights up when I take my time staring down at her naked body.

"Back to your old ways, I see," she taunts before covering my view.

“Can’t blame a man for enjoying the view when it’s perfection.”

“Oh, and we’re laying it on thick.” She smiles into the mirror at me behind her.

“How are you feeling about today?” I ask, setting my coffee cup beside her on the counter. I draw her hair to the side, taking in her freshly showered scent when my nose runs along her neck before kissing her temple.

She leans back into me, giving me her weight and trusting me to support her. It’s the little things like this that show me just how much she does. Her shoulders heave, and her eyes drop to the sink.

“I think I’m more nervous about this than the job in a few days. I hate that I’ll be weak from the donation, but I know it’s worth it.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. You know I’d never let it. And in three days, we can put all of this behind us and start living again.”

Laughing, she turns in my arms to look up at me. “I don’t even know what that looks like anymore. I need to get a job.”

“You don’t need to get a job,” I reassure her. However, it’s my way of keeping her close.

“I can’t not work, Harkin. I won’t stay cooped up inside your apartment. We’ve had this conversation before.”

“What about school?” I ask.

“School?”

“College. You could go and figure out what you want to do for the rest of your life.”

She barks another laugh, patting me placatingly against the cheek. “I didn’t finish high school. What makes you think college is in the cards.”

She doesn’t see it. The genius is hidden deep down under years of self-preservation and keeping afloat. She could do anything she wanted with the proper support.

“You want to go to school? We’ll make it happen. If you want to find a career that doesn’t require it, great. You finally give in and let me chain you up in the apartment as my personal sex slave.” She slaps my chest at that last one as if I’m being ridiculous, but it sounds like the best option to me. I grip her chin, meeting her gaze. “The only thing I won’t let you do is work some dead-end job so that you have something to do.”

With a roll of her eyes, she shoves me away. “Let’s worry about all of that later. Now, get out and stop distracting me so I can finish getting ready. We can’t be late for check-in.”

My skin itches the longer it takes for a nurse to come out and update me on how Keira’s doing. It’s been an hour and a half, and I’m ready to take my girl and leave. Throwing the magazine, I was trying to distract myself with down on the table. I stand and start to pace the waiting room. It’s empty, save for the receptionist tucked behind the shielded window. They have ten more minutes before I push through those double doors, demanding answers.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, on silent to avoid the disapproving looks from the receptionist for it going off again. I pull it out and see the text from James.

All set here. How’s Keira?

Still waiting for an update. Stacey squared away?

Yeah, got a shiner for my efforts, but now I don't have to worry.

Anything to report otherwise?

All's quiet here. Keep me posted tomorrow.

Got it.

James left right after Keira was able to convince Stacey to leave. I'm unsure where he sent her, but it's better that way. Now, he's prepped and waiting to recover my father when I give him the go. Domenico can negate on his word all he wants after this. I'm done. And if my father finds himself in a similar situation in the future, I'll be looking the other way.

"Mr. Greyson?" a woman in dark blue scrubs asks.

"Yes, that's me."

"Keira is out of the procedure. Everything went well. They're taking her to the recovery room, where she'll be able to wake up slowly as the anesthesia wears off. Once we get her situated, someone will come out to get you. It should only be another thirty minutes or so."

"Okay, thank you."

She disappears back behind the double doors, and I check my watch. This morning's coffee is dwindling. I need another hit of caffeine, and I need to find it quickly. The clinic has a coffee cart in the lobby, and I order something for both of us.

“There she is. How are you feeling?” I ask when Keira’s eyes flutter open.

“Groggy. How did it go?”

“They said it went great. Nothing out of the ordinary, and we can leave as soon as you feel ready.”

Nodding, she closes her eyes, disappearing back into unconsciousness. It’s another hour before she’s discharged and secured in the SUV to get back to the apartment. She lets me all but carry her upstairs and back into bed. She won’t be leaving it until tomorrow at the earliest.

“Do you need anything?” I ask, tucking the blanket around her slumping body.

“Have you seen my phone?”

“It’s probably in your bag. I’ll go grab it.”

The phone in question has a missed call from an unknown number, but it’s the follow-up text from the same number that piques my curiosity. I take it with me to the kitchen to make Keira something to eat and drop it on the counter, but a nagging feeling to check and see if there’s more there won’t go away.

She didn’t save the number, but the text thread goes back days, and it’s not good. I rush from the kitchen, abandoning the food. The door slaps against the wall, and Keira jolts at the noise, sitting up against the headboard.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” I bite, stomping to the mattress to throw the phone in her lap.

Her eyes bug out when she sees what I left pulled up on the screen.

“You went through my texts?”

“That’s the least of our fucking problems. Do you even know who you’ve been scheming with?” I shout, and she cringes against the headboard.

That’s only until her eyes light with fire, and she tries to get up on her knees to take me on, face to face. She sucks in a pained breath at the shift, and my anger drains at the pain written all over her face. I move to help her, but she slaps my hands away, finding her balance.

“You don’t understand. I have the chance to keep him out of my life forever.”

“Sweetness.” I soften. “What if it’s him? You’re putting yourself in danger just by engaging with whoever this is. Did you even try to track it?”

Her eyes narrow and roll. “Of course I did. I weighed the options. It’s worth the risk.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You would have tried to talk me out of it.”

“You’re damn fucking right, I would have. This is idiotic.”

“Fine. It’s stupid, I know that. But I don’t care. You weren’t involved before; you don’t have to be involved now. Just let me handle it.”

My patience snaps. Shoving her back to the mattress, disregarding her cry of discomfort, I climb over her before gripping her chin in a tight hold.

“That’s not how this works, Keira. You don’t get to run off and make crazy decisions that put your life at risk. Not anymore.”

She tries to yank free from my grasp, but I refuse to let her go until she understands. If anything were to happen to her and I could have stopped it, I’d lose my fucking mind.

“You’re not going to call off this harebrained scheme, are you?”

“No.”

“Then we’re in this together.” I drop a kiss on her forehead and push off her soft body. “Now get some sleep, and we can figure this out later.”

She relaxes into the mattress and gives me a small nod. I’ll let her sleep for a few hours, but we’re on a time clock. The drop is tomorrow evening, and this new information could spin all our plans into a web that catches us all.

I don’t need her device to go through her phone, just the clone I made ages ago that sits tucked in my desk for times like these. I refuse to mindlessly follow someone who knows too much for my comfort. Keira doesn’t know who it is, but I have an idea. Regardless of how unlikely it might be, I need to check.

I open the phone and plug it into my computer. She said she tracked them but couldn’t find anything. It’s not shocking if it’s a burner, but I have something up my sleeve that Keira wasn’t likely to think about. I open another browser, using my link to access the dark web, where I can search for her footprint.

Something else dawns on me, and I pop to another screen to run a diagnostic check on my system. She was gone by the time we started planning for the job. How would she have known about it? The code runs, and I pray to a God I don’t believe in that I

wasn't that careless and stupid.

The number doesn't produce any leads. Keira was right with that one. I search the boards for jobs that could lead to a connection. When I spot it, I'm down a rabbit hole, and my system to the left freezes.

"Fuck!"

I switch gears, digging into the code where the hole now is, how she got in. She knows, and now she owes me an explanation.

I rip the cloned phone from the cord, disconnecting it to the computer, and type the number into my own burner. I don't bother with a threatening text, going straight for a call. It rings and rings; the tone coming through isn't from the US.

"Papa Pete's Pizza, what can I get for you today?"

"Hello, Nikita."

THIRTY-FOUR

KEIRA

Do or Die - Natalie Jane

My body is sore, and I'm shaky on my feet, but other than that, I'm strong enough to peel myself from the bed and search for Harkin. It's well into the witching hour, and I expected him to wake me so we could talk. The pain pills coursing through my veins have the replay of our fight from earlier foggy in my head. The living room and kitchen lie cloaked in darkness while the lights from the streetlamps cast an eerie glow. Maybe it's the day to come, looming in the wings.

His office door is closed, but the faint light spilling under the floorboards leaves a soft glow, letting me know I've found him. I draw in a steading breath and push the door open. He's typing away at something on his screen, and his eyes don't lift as I enter, but he knows I'm here.

"Come here, sweetness."

My hesitant steps lead me around to his side, and I lower myself to the desk's top. He keeps working at whatever has his attention, his fingers flying as the keys clack into the quiet night. The wait only serves to draw out my anxiety. I pick at my nail beds, focused intently on the dry skin there.

The sound stops, and his office chair spins toward me before he drags me into his lap.

“Oof.”

“How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but nothing the pain pills aren’t covering, so ignore the loopiness.”

Chuckling, he nuzzles into my hair. His warm hands skate up my naked thighs, sending heat racing to my core. It’d be so easy to forget why I came searching for him and let him distract me with his wicked ways.

“We should talk.”

“It’s a little late for that, sweetness.”

My body tenses at his words. This will lead to another fight, and if I’m not careful, I’ll find myself locked up and unable to do what I need tomorrow.

“Relax and look.”

He slides the chair back in front of the monitors, and I take in the mix of information displayed across multiple screens. For the most part, it’s a bunch of meaningless code. My brain doesn’t recognize the patterns and queues like his would.

“What am I looking at?”

“Your contact.”

“Wait, you figured out who it was? How?”

“I had a hunch and followed it.”

“And?” I ask.

“It’s going to be a wild ride later today.”

“Oh, now, you think it’s a good idea?” I snark back.

“Now that I know it’s not someone on the inside trying to fuck you over. Yeah.”

“You’re infuriating.”

“Right back at ya, sweetness.”

I’m quiet for a minute, trying to make heads from tails on the information he’s left up on the screen. I don’t see anything that would give away who the contact was. Letters and numbers mix and run the screen too quickly to catch most of it.

“Are you going to tell me who it is?”

“I think it’s best if you don’t know.”

I turn and resituate in his lap to search his eyes for the truth. I kept this from him because I was scared of his reaction, but maybe it’s finally time to admit to myself that Harkin will always put me first. If he thinks it’s best for me not to know, that must mean knowing will fuck up my concentration and possibly send me off the handle.

Great , another thing to unravel.

“You should get some sleep,” I tell him.

The dark bags under his eyes only bring out the red rimming his irises from straining

on the screens for who knows how long.

“I’m fine. I still have a few more things I need to finish. But you should go back to sleep, sweetness.”

“Only if you come with me.” I smirk, tracing my fingers up his arms before digging them into his messy hair and giving it a rough pull.

“You’re high on pills.”

“All the better.”

“You’re healing from surgery.”

“So, make the pain go away.”

“You’re—”

I’m tired of listening to his excuses. Slamming my lips into his, I catch him off guard, and it takes him a moment to gain the upper hand. When he does, he doesn’t devour me as I’d intended. He coaxes the moans from deep within my soul. My core pulses at the same tempo he keeps with his tongue, drawing lazily against mine as if we have all the time in the world and aren’t on a countdown to all hell breaking loose.

His lips descend the front of my neck, tracing feather-light touches downward until they wrap around my nipple through the thin silk material I’m wearing.

“Harkin, more,” I plead, like a sinner on her knees, before Lucifer himself.

“More what, little one?” he asks, between biting kisses against my skin until he’s captured my other nipple, pulling it taut between his teeth.

“Harder. Faster. More,” I beg.

“If you want this. If you want to come, we’re taking it slow. Do you understand?”

I sigh in annoyance, and his skillful mouth pulls away, leaving me cold and wanton.

“This, or you can go back to bed with your hot cunt pulsing and nothing to dull the ache.”

“Don’t stop.”

I shift and straddle him, my knees knocking into the armrests. My fingers work quickly to shove his gray sweatpants down and free his cock. He’s hard and pulses in my hand when I jack him slowly, drawing out his pleasure just the same as his teasing touches up my back. Pre-cum leaks from his tip, and I run my thumb through it, dragging it across his purple-tinged crown. Hiking my silk slip to my hips with one hand, I lead him to my entrance to take him inside me, but Harkin stalls my efforts with his large, hot hands around my hips.

Letting me drop an inch, he pulls me back, repeating the process and keeping my movement excruciatingly shallow. He stokes my heightened desire to build it, but never lets me fully reach my peak. I’m seconds away from climbing off and handling things myself back in our bedroom. He must feel the shift in my demeanor because his eyes lock on mine, and he thrusts up, bottoming out.

“Fuck!” I scream through the apartment.

“Is that what you wanted, little one? To feel me so deep, you’ll ache from my loss the rest of the day?”

“Yes,” I whisper, lost to our bodies' rhythm as we pick up the pace.

My head swims from the pills, making it hard to focus on the tightness building in my core. But then a tingling crosses my skin, breaking through my mental block, and I roll my hips searching for friction against my clit. It comes with a wave of pleasure, pushing me closer to my peak, and I explode. Stars dance behind my closed lids, and I shudder, falling apart in Harkin's arms as he races to join me.

He controls my relaxed body with a firm grip, hammering into me from below as I lay limp against his warm chest. He jerks and holds my hips down against himself, finding his pulsing release deep inside my pussy.

"Jesus, woman," he breathes out, stilling underneath me.

I'm relaxed, coaxed onto the cusp of unconsciousness. I could fall asleep here in his arms and not think twice about the fact that he's still seated deep inside me, his cum waiting to spill free.

"How about we get you back to bed now?" he asks as he kisses my cheek.

I mumble my approval, but it doesn't seem to break past my lips as a clear statement. Harkin's laugh bounces my body against his chest. I'm jolted from my perch on his lap into the air. He takes a second to kick free from his sweats before we both go toppling to the ground.

I don't let go of my hold around his neck when he lays me down, wanting to pull him with me into bed so he can finally get some rest. "Come to bed," I whine, my eyes blurring and ready to close to pull me under.

"Let me clean you up, and then I'll join you."

"You take such good care of me."

“Shh, go to sleep.”

His lips caress my skin and disappear into nothingness as sleep claims me.

A harsh pounding and raised voices startle me awake. I groan, throwing off the sheet to climb out of bed. Rushing toward the sounds of breaking pottery, I stumble to a stop in the hallway. Harkin fights off two hulking men, resembling the muscle that brought us to my grandfather. I'm weaponless until my eye catches on the small glass decorative orb on one of the coffee tables. The previously useless home décor is heavy in my hand, and I lob it at the man with his back toward me.

“The fuck do you two think you're doing in our home,” I yell at the meatheads trying to manhandle Harkin into submission.

The intruders, now distracted by my arrival, lose the upper hand of their two-on-one with Harkin. He launches a right hook and sends one collapsing to the ground. The other guy rushes him, forgetting I'm there in the hallway. Throwing my hands up, I shuffle back to the last bedroom, peeking inside to grab one of the many guns we have stashed around the apartment. They're still fighting when I return; the one from the floor has regained his footing, and punches hurl through the air.

The apartment is decently soundproofed, but I doubt it'll keep the neighbors from hearing a gunshot and sending the police. That leaves me with two options, send off a warning shot or hope that pressing the barrel to one of these asshole's heads is enough to cut the bullshit. I choose the latter, keeping the former in my pocket.

“I said, what the fuck are you doing here?” I yell, stepping up to one of the men trying to wrestle Harkin's arms again and pressing the gun into the back of his head.

He stills, and the scene finally settles. I shove the gun harder into his skull, waiting for an answer.

“Listen, I’ve asked twice now. If you make me ask again, my finger might get a little twitchy, and then your friend over there is going to have to explain to my father or grandfather, whoever the fuck you two work for, why you didn’t come back with him. How about you don’t cause me more issues with them and answer the fucking question,” I bite out, sounding slightly more unhinged than the irritation I’m actually feeling.

Harkin chuckles, and the guy under my hand bristles. It’s the man across from us that finally speaks up.

“Your father sent us to collect Mr. Greyson to ensure today’s job runs smoothly. He said you weren’t needed.”

“Oh, did he now? And tell me, Frank, I can call you Frank, right?”

“It’s Nico,” he says, rocking from foot to foot.

“Great. Here’s what you’re going to do, Nico. You’ll call up your boss and tell him that Mr. Greyson isn’t going anywhere with you and that if my father needs someone to ensure this little scheme goes off without a hitch, he’ll have to take me instead.”

“Absolutely, fucking not,” Harkin roars. “You’re still recovering. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Listen to me.” I lock my gaze on his beautiful blue eyes. “If my father is going to take someone hostage, it’s going to be me. Don’t push me on this.”

I need him to let me go. My father isn’t likely to harm a hair on my head, but Harkin, I don’t trust the two alone in the same room. Once the job is done, he might get the idea in his head to eliminate the obstacle standing in his way of me joining the family. He’s delusional enough to think that would be the key to his success when

it'd be an excellent way to get himself removed from this planet.

"I don't see you calling your boss like I said, Nico. Come on. I thought we were making progress."

The man doesn't have much of a backbone for the line of work he's in. His partner shifts, and I shove the gun again, reminding him of its existence.

"Na uh, buddy. You just keep standing there and wait until we have word from your boss. How about that."

He stops shifting, his hulking form a good eight inches over mine, and if I'm being honest, my arm is starting to ache from holding the gun up.

Nico finally moves, digging a phone out of his pocket and making the call. The call must ring for a while because he starts looking antsy before someone picks up and he can speak. They go back and forth, and a line of sweat beads on his brow. He clears his throat, muttering a "yes, sir," before hanging up.

"Mr. Morelli has agreed to your terms."

"Very well. Now, if you two will give me a few minutes to get dressed and grab the stuff I need to work, I'll meet you in the parking garage in ten."

Nico looks a little unsure if he should leave and possibly let me slip through his fingers. But I have no intention of going back on my offer. I just need a few minutes to reassure Harkin that this is what we need for the plan to work and to put on some pants.

THIRTY-FIVE

HARKIN

THE DEATHE OF PEACE OF MIND - Bad Omens

The moment she's back within my grasp, I'm going to strangle the life out of her. I don't care if her logic made sense, and this serves to give us a leg up. She should have let them take me instead. Her tracker cruises further from the apartment, and my skin itches as I watch the little dot inch closer to the docks.

I was on the phone with James the second the front door slammed shut in my face. This is a code red, and we're onto plan B. He still hadn't confirmed eyes on my father, but now that Keira's out there, his safety and retrieval are falling down a peg on my list of importance.

The line on the other end rings and rings, stopping on a voicemail that's not set up. I hang up and dial again. I'll keep calling until she picks up the phone to loop her in on what's happening. If they're taking Keira to the docks, I have a hard time believing Domenico won't be there to watch over his daughter. Not to make sure she's safe, but to ensure she's doing the job he's tasked her with.

The ringing ceases, and the irritating robot tells me again that the user hasn't set up the voicemail box. I start again on the merry-go-round, but this isn't working. If I can't reach her by phone, an email might work. It's not one everyone would have access to, but she left it for me to find. I just never needed to look for it.

It takes two minutes for a response to hit my inbox— thank fuck —but reading over her message only accelerates my worry. She wants confirmation that Domenico's with Keira, and I want assurances that my girl won't be in a body bag or cuffs by the time I make it down there. The only person putting cuffs around her delicate wrists will be me.

Once she arrives where they're taking her, I should be able to get into the cameras on the premises. That is, as long as there are cameras to hack into. A new email notification dings on my system, and my heartbeat calms slightly. The plan is still a go. I let her know I'll confirm, if possible, but Keira likely won't be in contact.

Watching the only connection I have to the love of my life on the app, there's nothing for me to do but sit and wait until she stops moving. The restlessness takes over, and I jump out of my seat, pacing back and forth, my eyes never leaving the monitor. Cinder watches, my anxiety piquing her senses, and her ears perk when I kick the office chair into the cabinets.

Fuck this. I need to be there with her.

It takes five minutes for me to lock up the apartment and make it to the parking garage. Keira's still moving toward the docks, but that doesn't mean it's their destination. My phone connects to the car's system, and the engine roars to life, echoing against the concrete. The screech of my tires mixes with the smell of burnt rubber as I burn out onto the street, cutting off the oncoming traffic. I use her GPS marker to guide me, barely paying attention to my surroundings and the lights I pass through.

Ten minutes into my drive, her cursor stops. Not at the docks. Well, not exactly. They're two blocks over. Likely, Domenico's holed up. Close enough to intervene, if necessary, but far enough to avoid problems should they arise. My foot hits resistance when the gas pedal bottoms out, throwing my body back against the seat. Horns blare

as I weave through traffic on the expressway. I'll be lucky if I make it without rousing the red and blues.

I beat their arrival time and stop a few buildings back. My BMW sticks out like a sore thumb in this part of the city. Then again, with the event at the pier ramping up to start in a couple of hours, maybe people will just assume someone parked off the property.

Scanning the buildings, I tag the SUV that likely belongs to Domenico's men. Keira's tracker is within one hundred yards and glows green at our proximity. Maybe I should remote access her system and let her know what's happening. But I don't know if she's being watched. That could put her in more danger.

My eyes flick to the time on the stereo. Two more hours until they dock. Another hour for them to unload and get the merchandise in the truck. Sitting in here, keeping my eyes peeled, makes me feel like a PI on the case of some unfaithful husband. It's boring as fuck, I need to take a piss, and my anxiety to get things rolling is reaching an all-time high.

Finally, a group of men rush out of the building. I don't see Domenico or Keira in tow, and her tracker hasn't moved much from where she started. I send the news off. She won't like it, but now they have three targets to work with. It's not my job to make it easier on them. They have the resources. Now's the time to use it.

The street's grown dark, loud music now pumping from the event venue they're using for cover down at the docks, and it filters in through my cracked windows. The clock flicks over to eleven fifteen, and the hair on the nape of my neck stands at attention.

Any unsuspecting civilian might miss them if they didn't know what to look for. The shadows are dressed in head-to-toe black, face masks covering everything but their eyes, while their rifles are posed at the ready to breach the building. They line up

single file on either side of the door, and my fingers itch to reach for the handle and join them.

Then, everything happens in a unified instant. The doors are kicked in. Yells of a command drown out the music from the party. A flashbang lights up the inky street, and smoke pours from the doors as they breach the building.

That's when I hear it. The gunfire popping off in succession. I'm out of the car and on my feet, racing toward the action with my gun drawn. Fuck the repercussions. Pure chaos bleeds through the building. Smoke lingers heavily in the air, making it difficult to breathe. They must have cut the electricity because the only thing lighting up the space is the muzzles of guns firing away.

"Keira!" I yell at the top of my lungs, but no answer comes.

I stumble over something big and soft, blocking my path. I cast my gaze down. The body lies in a pool of darkness. I guess the no-kill order only extends to Domenico. That's a fucking problem. The gunfire slows, the shuffle of heavy boot steps following suit.

The deep voice of whoever must be in charge calls out, "Come out with your hands up."

I wonder if Domenico's locked himself away and if he's dragged my girl into their path. I suddenly regret moving forward with Keira's plan and not leaving his fate to my own hands. I creep down the hall, searching for where they have him cornered. Cornered men are the most dangerous kind when left with no options but the one in front of them.

The same deep voice from before calls out again, giving him one last chance to come out peacefully. I know what comes next. They'll kick down that door and take him by

force. I pick up my pace, wishing I'd taken the hours I had in the car waiting to look up that damn floor plan for this fucking place.

The closed-off hallway ends, extending into an open space that must have been some kind of laundry plant in its time. A red glow from the emergency exit signs gives off the shapes of industrial-sized machines lining the walls, and an empty garment conveyor hangs in the center. The men from outside stand in formation on the other side of the room, focused on a small, closed-off room. They're too far left to notice the man creeping closer with a glint in his eye and a point to prove to his boss.

I step out from behind the counter I've been using to conceal my approach and aim. The gunfire echoes through the concrete room, and his body hits the floor with a sickening thud. The unexpected shots draw all the heat on me. I can't get back to my hiding spot fast enough.

Hot burning pain rips through my chest while pandemonium erupts around me. My knees buckle, razing my body to the ground. A cough rips from my chest, splattering blood across my face. Fuck, that hurts. Shouts sound from above me, and I try to keep my eyes open, but they feel heavy. There's a pressure on my chest, but the tension releases as the darkness drags me away from the scene unfolding around me.

"Harkin!"

Her screams haul me back from the blackness creeping in from every direction. I fight to open my eyes, but can't manage more than a crack. It's blurry. A soft blob hovers over my face. This is it. I might be done for, but I refuse to leave this life without locking onto her beautiful face one last time to hold me over on the next plane until our souls meet again.

"Harkin, please. Baby. Fight for me. No! Don't close your eyes. Look at me, dammit. You're not leaving me."

Her haunted sobs bleed through, and I tell her I won't leave. At least, I think the words come from my lips. But maybe not. Because her screams aren't letting up, she isn't settling down. I want to pull her into my chest and tell her everything will be okay, but I can't feel my arms.

Death hovers in the wings. It waits for no one when your card's been punched. It doesn't care if you have unfinished business or something to live for. It takes you against your will without a care, and my time is here. It's her pleads to a God she doesn't believe in that fill my head as I drag in my last stunted breath and finally fade away into nothingness.

THRITY-SIX

KEIRA

Hurts Like Hell - Tommy Profitt, Fleurie

The priest finishes his prayer and motions for the casket to be lowered into the grave. I feel nothing. My body's numb after the last two weeks of losing my damn mind. My puffy eyes sting, and my cheeks burn from the chafed skin caused by the gallons of tears I've cried. At least they're hidden from the crowd behind oversized-tinted sunglasses.

"At this time, I'd like to call forth anyone who would like to say a final goodbye at the gravesite," the priest offers.

Stace squeezes my hand, and the warmth of her skin against mine offers the slightest comfort. I'm sure she's trying to get my attention to see if I want to go up, but I'm not ready. We watch the crowd parade by single file as they stop by his grave and exit to the cars parked along the grassy hills of the cemetery.

A deafening silence falls over me and my remaining support system. The birds don't chirp, and the city sounds seem blocked by an invisible barrier. It's as if the world knows I can't handle more than what I'm already trying to process.

"I think we should go. Are you ready?" Nikita asks from my other side.

Brushing out the non-existent wrinkles from my black dress, I stand and wobble on

my heels. Nikita and Stacey move in to wrap themselves around me. This is another reminder of why I never wanted to open my heart to someone new, because this is always how things end. I should have known better, yet I let myself do it anyway. I can feel that same wall Harkin demolished, brick by brick, rebuilding into place.

We head for the car, James steps up to pull Stacey into his side protectively. We shouldn't be in any danger anymore, but I can't blame him for wanting to hold them close. Nikita drapes her arm around my shoulder. She's been a rock for me after magically reappearing after the firefight. We had it out. I screamed at her for letting me believe she'd been killed. She explained that the plan was set in motion the moment she opened her front door, and I stood there with a problem, looking for help. She told me Harkin found her out and knew he shouldn't have interfered with their attempt to capture Domenico. That had caused a whole new fight.

They climb into the limo ahead of me, and as I'm about to fold my body into the back seat, a whisper of my name comes through the rustling of the leaves overhead. Looking over my shoulder, I wonder if I'll see his ghost. If I'll get one last glimpse of him before I leave him here to rot away, six feet under, with the worms. But, of course, that's not what I see when my eyes finally focus on the scene ahead of me. The one person I could have gone without seeing today steps nearer.

“Keira, I?—”

But she doesn't continue, as if the words between us are too hard to piece together after everything that's happened. Instead, my eyes scan to the little girl at her side. The one who looks like she's been plucked from my childhood memories. She takes after her mom, and I idly wonder who her father is and if his DNA offered any traits to my niece.

Alina clears her throat, and my gaze swings back to hers. She doesn't hide her pain behind sunglasses as I do. She displays it proudly, another play in her book for the

attention she always craves.

“Sofia wanted to meet her aunt. The woman who’s helping her get better.” Alina looks down at her with more love than I thought she was capable of and scoots the little girl forward in my direction.

I drop into a crouch, my knee falling to the soft, wet grass. “Hi, Sofia,” I offer awkwardly.

Her eyes light up, and she rockets into my arms. It takes me aback. The unfiltered kindness of this child punches me in the gut and brings the tears I thought I was fresh out of back to life. I sniffle into her soft hair and hug her a little tighter. When she pulls away and steps back to her mom, I give them both a tight smile and rise from the ground. The air around us crackles with awkward tension.

“I should go.” I nod and turn back to the car to climb in, but before I can pull the door closed, something stops me. “Hey, Alina, get out. Now that he’s dealt with, you don’t have to stay. It’s what our mom did. It might not have saved her in the end, but it did me. Well, kind of.” I shrug. “She deserves better.” I nod to my niece, clinging to her mother’s skirt.

Her eyes follow my gaze down, but when they move back to me, devastation is written all over her face.

“I wish it was that easy.” Her hand falls to her stomach, and it’s enough to tell me how trapped she is in the life she semi-chose.

“That’s an even better reason. Call Patrick, Alina. It’s what’s best for all of you.”

She sniffles and nods, leaning down to pick Sofia up into her arms. I watch them disappear over the hill before closing the door to the limo to find three sets of eyes

boring into me.

“Don’t.”

I know what they’re all thinking. I’ve spent months wanting to scratch her eyes out, but after everything, I can’t be bothered to hold on to the hatred for her that once boiled through my veins. She’ll never be a sister, but my heart bleeds for my niece and the next one to come. They’re innocent in this world, untouched by its wickedness that contorts mere mortals into the monsters that roam freely among us.

“Do you want to head back to the apartment? Take a shower and change?” Stacey asks.

“No, take me to him.”

“Keira, I don’t—I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You need to rest and eat something. That’s what Harkin would want,” James insists.

Stacey’s gasp hits the sentiment right on the head. Nikita slides closer to my side, offering her support.

“Well, he’s not fucking here, is he, James!” I say, the hurt from his statement lacing through every word.

“Keira, I—I didn’t. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Just tell the driver where to take me.”

“Are there any updates?” I ask as she sweeps into the room.

“No, everything should be out of his system. Now, it’s just up to him,” she tells me

with a soft smile.

“Okay, thank you.” I squeeze his tattooed hand harder.

The steady beep of the heart monitor tethers me to his bedside. I didn’t want to leave to attend Domenico’s funeral, but I needed the closure of seeing his body lowered into the ground. Memories from that day dig deeper into my psyche whenever I replay the madness. One minute, Domenico was forcing me into the small office, his men rushing to cover their boss from the ambush, and the next, he was using his body to shield mine from the gunfire raining down on us when the hidden hatch wouldn’t pry open. It didn’t make up for all the terrible things he’d done in his life, but it did leave me with an ounce of something akin to respect for the man I’d never known as a father.

James recovered Harkin’s father from one of Domenico’s hideouts. He’d been whisked away on his private jet to a medical facility in another country without an extradition treaty. I didn’t have the mental capacity to care about his escape from any legal consequences for his involvement with my father and his crimes. From what James told me, he was barely hanging on to life as it was. Scott Greyson wasn’t likely to ever recover from the torture he suffered at the hands of Domenico’s men, and that would have to be punishment enough. For now.

She finishes checking his vitals and pupils for a response before turning back to me and letting me know the doctor should be by within the next hour.

“Hey, you mulish, infuriating man. I need you to wake up now.” I bring his fingers up to my lips and hold them there. “You promised me we could run away. That it would be just you and me.” My voice cracks. “I can’t do life alone anymore, Harkin. You’ve shown me what it’s like to have someone in my corner, and I’ve come to rely on it.” I collapse forward, laying my head on his stomach, avoiding the bandages covering the surgical wounds from saving his life from the gunshot wound. “I miss fighting with

you. I miss your firm hand when I sass back and the way you use it to calm me from the depths of my panic attacks.” I let my eyes fall closed, my body exhausted from sleeping beside him for weeks on end. “I love you. Come back to me,” I whisper, letting sleep pull me away from this bleak reality.

A firm shake of my shoulder drags me from an uncomfortable, fitful sleep. The fluorescent lights burn my corneas, and I shut my eyes to ward off the unwanted brightness. My back pops as I lift off the bed from my hunched position and finally look around to see who’s waking me.

“Baby girl. You can’t keep doing this.”

I throw her an annoyed look. Since returning from the dead, she’s been hovering worse than a helicopter parent at Central Park.

“You know he can hear you.”

Her lips draw up in a smirk, and she looks over at Harkin, who is tucked into the hospital bed. “Good. Maybe it’ll wake him so he can yell at me for flirting with you again.”

Her joke manages to pull a half-hearted chuckle from me, but I shut it down the second the sounds break free. I shouldn’t be laughing while he’s still fighting to wake up. It’s been days, and the doctor said everything looks great, but he needs to push through and fight to wake up.

“Listen, I’m asking this in the most loving way possible, but when was the last time you showered? You smell like week-old takeout that’s been forgotten behind the dumpster outside my apartment.”

“If you’re just here to insult me, you can leave,” I say with a glare.

“Baby, you can take ten minutes to step away and care for yourself. I’ll stay. If anything happens, I’ll yell for you.”

I take in a deep breath. I know she’s right. I’m not taking care of myself. Harkin would kick my ass if he could. Shit, he may still when he finally wakes up. If he wakes up, I remind myself of the possibility.

“Fine.”

“Good! I brought you clean clothes and toiletries. They’re in that bag.” She nods toward the tote sitting on the dresser.

I grab the bag and head for the en suite bathroom, turning back before I close the door. “Thanks, Nik.”

The shower really was needed. I feel refreshed and slightly more human. Nik brought me some coffee and a hot meal from the cafeteria, the first real food I’d eaten in days. It’s amazing how long you can survive off junk from the vending machine when everything tastes like cardboard anyway.

It’s late now, the halls are dimmed, and the nurses’ station is quiet for the night. I’m too wound up from sitting all afternoon. I think the lack of fresh air and unblocked sunlight affects my natural circadian rhythm. I flip through the TV channels, nothing but infomercials and reruns of 90s sitcoms play on the cable.

“Forget it. This is why no one has cable anymore.” I throw the remote down and slump in the hospital chair that’s permanently deformed from my ass.

“That’s a bit... dramatic.” His rough voice stumbles over the last word.

“Harkin!”

EPILOGUE

KEIRA - SIX MONTHS LATER

Be Your Love - Bishop Briggs

My hips sway to the filthy beat pumping out of the bathroom's sound system and into our bedroom. The apartment is quiet otherwise. Harkin left earlier this afternoon, saying he had something to take care of with James for restarting his business. Shoving through the clothes in our closet, I can't find the right thing to wear tonight. I wanted to be comfortable and relaxed, but Stacey demanded we get dressed up as a last hurrah to her pre-mommy life.

She insisted I needed a girls' night out, even though that now looks like dinner and a movie instead of loud music and copious amounts of shots now that she's creeping into her last month of pregnancy. She wasn't wrong. I've been stressed and need to let off some steam with my best friend. Plus, we could both use a breather from our men. Since the shooting and the longest three weeks of my life, while Harkin was in a coma, neither of them has wanted to leave our sides.

We've been a closed-off unit, helping Harkin recoup and get back to his old self through much-needed therapy, both physical and psychological. He convinced me to seek my own psychiatrist when the night terrors got so bad I started getting physically harmed in my sleep. It's been good. Not only have we talked about everything surrounding my father and the shooting, but she's started prying into my childhood. There was more to unlock there than I remembered, and it's been like removing cylinder blocks from my ankles by working through it. After all my tears from

fearing I was going to lose Harkin for good, I thought my body was incapable of producing more. I was wrong. It's a miracle if I can make it through a single session without going through a box of tissues, but it's worth it.

The music swaps to something upbeat, and I bob my head back and forth, finally deciding on a little emerald slip dress from the back of my closet.

"Ahhh!" The dress flies from my hands when I feel an unexpected pressure on my shoulder.

Stacey's boisterous laughter fills the closet as she hunches over, legs crossed. "Oh my god. That was totally worth almost peeing myself. Did you not hear me calling you?"

"Obviously, fucking not," I deadpan.

Her laughter calms, and she looks me up and down. "You're not ready."

"I just have to get dressed. My hair and makeup are done."

She lifts an eyebrow, inspecting me closer. It's weird. Why does it matter if I only put on a little mascara and eyeliner? I didn't want to bother with a full face for dinner and a movie. Plus, I was too lazy to curl my hair, so the natural half-tamed waves will have to do. She's seen me way worse.

"Is that what you're wearing?" She juts her chin to my dress, hanging haphazardly off the rest of the clothes.

"Yeah. Is that okay?" I ask, getting suspicious.

"Perfect! Hurry up, I don't want to be late for our reservation. I'm starving. Eating for two and all," she calls over her shoulder, heading back out of the closet and out of the bedroom door.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm changed and done up a little extra with gold jewelry to complement the rich hue of my dress. Since the guys are still busy, we hail a cab at the curb, and Stacey rattles off the restaurant's address to the driver. We chat about nothing important while the car moves slowly through evening traffic. I didn't realize we were trekking it all the way uptown, but I just went with whatever Stace wanted to do with her last night of freedom.

"Okay, here you are," the driver announces, pulling up to the curb in front of a nondescript building.

"Uh, Stace. Where are we?"

"Come on! I found this place online; the food looks delicious." She grabs my hand and pulls me toward the front door.

I'm more hesitant about the unknown these days, and I nearly yank her pregnant body back from opening the tinted door. But when we step inside, a woman waits near the door as if she's expecting our arrival.

"Ms. Fitzpatrick, if you'll follow me."

I eye the two women suspiciously but follow her down a hall. I expect to see a quiet dining area, with cutlery clanking softly as people enjoy an evening out. It's quiet, alright, because it's empty. No one occupies the booths in the small nooks as we swiftly step into the open seating area. In the middle, surrounded by empty tables, Harkin looks dangerously delicious in an all-black tailored suit.

I stop on unsteady heels and whirl around to question Stacey about what's happening, but she's gone. Looking back at Harkin, I notice the woman who led me here has also disappeared.

"Are you just going to stand over there with your mouth hanging open, or should I

give you something better to do with that face?”

His lewd statement pulls my wits back together, and I stumble into motion toward him. “Harkin, what—What’s going on?”

“Come here, sweetness,” he commands, stepping around the table to pull my chair out for me.

The tea-light candles flicker in the center of the table. Two wineglasses sit full of dark red, the notes of which dance in the air as I slide into my seat. The gentle music filters into the room, extinguishing the abandoned building vibes.

“We’ve had one hell of a year, sweetness. The last couple of months have been immensely arduous for both of us. I thought we deserved a nice night to ourselves,” he says, sitting back on the other side of the table.

“Harkin, I would have been happy to do that at home. With take-out and a lot less clothing.” I smirk.

“That’s any other night of the week. I wanted to do something special.”

“Stacey was in on it, huh?”

“How else was I supposed to pull this off?” His bright smile lights up his face.

The five-course meal of tiny dishes is fine. I don’t understand the hype over places where you drop a car payment to leave hungry. Maybe my palate isn’t sophisticated enough to appreciate it. The company, however, makes up for my dissatisfied tastebuds. I could watch him talk for hours, hanging on to every word he utters and appreciating how lucky we are to have this second chance together.

“Keira.” My name breaks through the haze.

“Sorry.”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“I was distracted. Tell me again.”

“I asked if you were going to open your gift.”

I scrunch my eyes in confusion. But he nods down toward the table. The small box sits right in front of me. I don't know how I missed him placing it there. My hands shake as I lift the lid off the sleek black box, revealing the thin, etched silver jewelry.

“Harkin,” I say with a gasp, my eyes growing heavy with unshed tears.

“Do you like it? It's similar to the ones you not-so-sneakily saved on your computer. I had it made just for you.”

“It's stunning.”

He pushes away from the table and moves around to my side. Reaching down, he grabs the delicate collar from the box and pulls a small tool from his pocket.

“I know society tells us that when you love someone and want to spend the rest of your life with them, you should drop down on one knee to propose. But what is marriage other than a commitment to each other and a costly piece of paper? I don't care about the paper, Keira. I want the commitment. I promise to always care for you and prioritize your needs. To love you, day in and day out, even when I want to tie you to my bed and punish you for being a brat. I want the ups and the downs, little one. It's an honor to have your faith and trust put into my hands, inside and out of the bedroom, and I promise to always uphold that significance to the best of my abilities until the day I die.”

I try to hold it together, but a sob escapes, and Harkin pauses. His thumb brushes away the tears, but there's more the second he pulls away. I know what's coming next. It's been on my mind for months and in my dreams longer than I've admitted to him. Pushing away from the table, I slink to my knees on the restaurant's hard floor and sit back, keeping my eyes trained on him the entire time. His gaze is full of adoration that lights my chest with a warmth I've never experienced with anyone else.

"I offer you my collar as a symbol and agreement of your submission to me and the promise it means between us. Will you accept it, little one?"

I'm nodding uncontrollably before he's able to finish his question. "Yes, Sir. It would be my greatest honor and a dream come true," I rush out, eager to confirm.

I wait on bated breath as Harkin steps around me, clasping the collar around my neck and closing it into place with the tool he holds firmly in his hand.

"Keira, with this symbol of our pledge to each other, I recognize the responsibility you've entrusted to me. I will always use it fairly and never under the guise of falsities or in anger. Your happiness, safety, and love are mine to covet and cherish for the rest of our lives. I love you, little one."

Harkin holds out his hand, and I grasp it, using his strength to rise on shaky legs. The collar feels weighted around my neck. Not in the way life feels on your shoulders, pushing you down until you crumble into pieces. But like a protective hug holding you together in a space where you're able to spread your wings and finally be free.

"I love you too, Sir." I share his sentiment, drawing in a settling breath.

His lips crash into mine, coaxing them apart to dive inside and write our promise on my soul. I'm lost in his arms, giving in entirely and losing myself in the searing kiss. Something pings from his pocket, interrupting our moment, and he ignores it for a

while longer before pulling away slowly and dropping a soft kiss on my forehead.

I'm love drunk and ready to take this back to the apartment, but Harkin has a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he tucks his phone back in his pocket.

"What was that about?"

"Part two of the evening. I have one more gift for you."

He moves quickly, pulling a small bag from under the table to hand over.

"Harkin, I don't need anything else."

"Obstinate already, little one?"

"Ugh, you know that's not what I meant," I say with a huff.

With a smile, he shakes his head. "Well, then open this one as another gift to me."

A mass of tissue paper hides the content in the small boutique store bag. Harkin holds it from underneath to make it easier for me to pull out the small piece of lingerie. It's soft and beautiful, something I'd have easily picked out myself, with the green detailing of snakes stitched into the top and bottom.

"Well, it's certainly a gift for you. But it's stunning. I love it. Thank you, Sir."

"That's not all. Keep going."

I don't want to set the first half of his gift down, but it's hard to get to whatever's on the bottom. He holds out his hand to take it from me as if sensing my dilemma. Another small black box lies there. He said marriage wasn't on his mind, and it failed compared to what he was offering me with the collar, but now I'm wondering if that

was just a sleight of hand.

“Harkin?”

“Just open it, sweetness.”

I draw in a deep breath, preparing to be thrust back into a mess of tears. Lifting the lid, a bark of laughter spills from my lips. With everything going on, the same U-shaped silicone toy we haven’t played with in months sits nestled in its velvet bag.

“Now, take your gifts to the bathroom and change. We leave in ten minutes. I have a meeting to make at The Red Door.”

I don’t question him. Instead, I hustle to the bathroom and strip out of my dress, which is quick without anything underneath. Getting the toy in place doesn’t take much effort, but I shift back and forth on my heels to ensure it’ll stay and not embarrass me by falling out. Thankfully, the new lingerie set includes full-crotch panties that should help me out. I adjust to the fullness and straighten my dress back over my head. Doing a double check in the mirror, I see the natural rouge livening up my cheeks from the excitement for the rest of the night.

Harkin leans against the wall by the restaurant's front door, his phone pressed to his ear, but when he sees me approaching, he hangs up mid-sentence, turning his entire attention to me.

“Are you ready for our next adventure?” he asks.

“With you? I’m ready for anything.”

Dragging me into his chest, he drops his lips to my ear. “Remember that sentiment, little one.” He nips my sensitive flesh, and the toy inside me vibrates to life. “The Red Door awaits.”