



Vigilante

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Maximo

It was supposed to be an easy job. In and out, no strings attached.

Bringing justice and awareness to the world.

But then one decision to grab a cup of coffee derailed everything, bringing me her.

Julia doesn't know the truth of who I am and what I've done, but I couldn't stay away.

It could put her in danger, risking the one thing that I didn't expect,

but I don't know if I can let her go.

Julia

What seemed like a regular shift at Deja Brew ended up bringing me a man I

couldn't stop thinking about. He knew how to make me smile, but there's something

lurking beneath the surface that had me wondering what he's hiding.

Will his secret be too much to take, or is the budding attraction we have

for each other worth overcoming his dark past?

*Vigilante is intended for a mature audience of 18+

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1 YEAR AGO

“What are you talking about?” I shout at the doctor. I’ve been standing here for the past fifteen minutes listening to her tell me the same bullshit protocol that I’ve had to hear every single time I step foot in the hospital.

“Sir, please, I need you to?—”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “If the next words out of your mouth are ‘calm down,’ I’m going to lose my ever-loving shit.” Focusing back on her, the solemn look on her face fills me with instant regret at my previous outburst. It’s not her fault, fuck. It’s none of the medical workers’ fault that they spend their time saving people in Summerfield Hospital. “Look, I’m sorry, please just...” I pause briefly, swallowing the emotion back down. “Just tell me what I can do?”

The space between her eyebrows creases, not in irritation at repeating herself but more in sadness. “.” I already know exactly what she’s going to tell me without her even having to say it. “You know the only options here: you make another call, or we make your father as comfortable as we can. I wish there was?—”

“Yeah,” I nod, resting my hands on my hips, my head dropping forward in defeat as I fight the constant need to cry from rearing its ugly head. “I know.” Brushing against my nose with the back of my hand, I clear my throat. “I’ll make the call.”

Taking a step closer, she places her hand gently on my shoulder, but I feel nothing. “I’ll make the call, too. Maybe something will change in the next hour, okay?”

I don't respond. There's nothing to say right now, at least nothing I can think of. All I want to do, no, need to do, is go back into the hospital room and sit with my father. Doctor Forsyth presses her lips together, and the slight curve at the corner of her mouth barely reaches her eyes. She steps away from me and down the stark white corridor, disappearing around the corner.

How many more times do I have to kid myself into thinking that this time will be any different from the multitude of times I've called the medical insurance company, Copperfield Vitality.

It doesn't matter to them that my father has been lying in a hospital bed dying of cancer. They don't give a shit that they're charging prices that most—if not all—people in Chicago can't afford because, in the end, all that matters to them is money. I hear my father coughing behind me, so I take a deep breath and clear my mind of everything. There's no way I'm going to have him see me like this.

As I make my way back into the room, I watch my mother place the red and white straw in his mouth so he can comfortably sip the room-temperature water from the Styrofoam cup. They have been in love since they were kids, and I don't think I've ever witnessed a love come close to theirs, and it's beautiful to see.

"Mio figlio." My father beckons me over. "Sit, please."

Even though cancer has taken over most of his body, turning him into someone I barely recognize, his voice remains deep and commanding. Lifting his hand, he beckons me over to sit beside him. The memories I have with this man will forever be ingrained within me until the day I take my last breath.

Hard-working, strong, and one of the kindest men I had the pleasure to know. A powerful man who stood up for those who couldn't stand up for themselves, and the type of father who was always present, always kind, and made sure that my mother

and I always knew how important we were to him.

“La mia anima gemelli.”

My soulmate, he calls my mother.

“Why don’t you,” he pauses to take a breath, “go grab us both a coffee,” another breath, “and give me some time with my son.”

Giving him a gentle nod, she leans forward and places a soft kiss upon my father’s brow. “I’ll be back in five minutes.” She explains, looking at me, her eyes filled with absolute sorrow, and it breaks me from the inside out. I couldn’t have asked for two better parents to raise me. Now, one of them will be left alone and without the love of their life. It fucking guts me.

Once my mother walks out of the room, he takes my hand in both of his, and I look up at him. “You have to take care of her for me, ok?—”

“Dad, please, I really don’t want to have this conversation now.”

“Well, that’s tough,” he barks, causing him to have a brief coughing fit again. Fuck, when the cancer spread to his lungs, we knew there was no way he was going to survive this. It doesn’t matter how much money you have—and we don’t have a lot—it’s never enough to keep the ones you love safe from illness or worse...death.

This has been a long time coming, and with the insurance company refusing to front the cost of my father’s medication, we’re at a dead end. And it’s not just my family. The company has been denying so many claims and medical expenses that people are fucking struggling, dying left and right, and not a single person gives a shit.

I wrap my other hand on top of my father’s, resting my mouth against the back of his

hand, and close my eyes. Fuck, is this really it? Am I going to lose the man who made me who I am today? Who pushed me to study at the best schools, and worked day in and day out to have the money to provide me with the best education. Wasted his fucking life...on me.

“Don’t do that to yourself, bambino .”

“Do what?” I sigh, knowing exactly what he means.

“Hate yourself for what is about to happen.”

I look up at him, holding onto him as tightly as I possibly can. If this is all the time I have left with him, I’ll make sure he knows exactly how much I love him. “The insurance company is refusing to pay for the rest of your treatment.”

“I see.” He nods.

“I see?” I sit straighter. “That’s all you have to say?”

“What exactly do you expect me to say?” He questions, “I don’t have the lung capacity for it anyway.” He chuckles briefly.

The painful reality hitting me again. “Don’t do that,” I murmur.

“Son,” the breathing tube that rests under his nose lifts as he smiles softly. “You are, other than your mother, the greatest gift.” He begins, and all I do is sigh. “You will listen to this.” His voice turns stern. “I don’t have much time left...and I am...still...your father.” Taking another deep breath, he continues. “Take care of your mother, finish your education, and always remember... ti amo .”

“ Ti amo, pop,” I repeat back to him. My eyes are burning from the deep-rooted

sadness within me, clawing away at the fact that soon enough, my father will be dead, and I will be without a man that I hold in such high regard. A man and father who was everything one should be.

My mother walks back into the room, planting both coffees on the bedside table. I watch as my father turns his head to face her.

“Mio cara ...have I...told you today...how beautiful...you look?”

My mother rolls her eyes. “Even with everything happening, you still find the time to lie, but I love you...so at least there’s that.”

“I love you...too.” He replies faintly.

And that’s when I hear it, the screaming of the alarm as my father goes into cardiac arrest. Nurses rush into the room, and I move from the chair to give them space, taking my mother in my arms as she begins sobbing.

“No! Gio!” My mother cries out in devastation. “Stay with me, please!”

“We have a cardiac arrest, page Doctor Cooper and Doctor Forsyth.” The blonde nurse speaks to the other as they lower the bed flat. My mother’s screams permeate the room as they work on bringing my father back. And as I hold her, I offer a silent promise to both of them... the actions of the uncaring will be rectified.

CHAPTER 1

Julia

PRESENT DAY

I'm only an hour into my shift, and my non-slip shoes are already digging into my aching feet. Only seven more hours to go, and then I can go home to finish binge-watching *Stranger Things*. A host of regulars have been buzzing about, ordering their usual beverages and getting their caffeine fix. My blonde hair is loosely tied into a braid to keep it out of my face, but several flyaway pieces come loose as I pump out another order. Christmas music plays in the background, but with every new order, it's drowned out by the mechanical whirring of the coffee machine.

The line at least has died down enough that I'm not running at full tilt and have a moment to breathe. Just another day in this dead-end job, but it brings me a much-needed paycheck. Especially since I'm still paying off all my mother's medical debt, I might be stuck working here until I'm eighty to pay it all off.

"You going out tonight?" Ned, my manager asks. His moppy brown hair is smooshed down by a hairnet, pulling his bushy eyebrows taunt. He's been angling for a date since I started, and it's become annoying. There's only so many times a girl can say no politely, but as he holds the strings to this job I desperately need, I can't tell him to fuck off. No matter how much I want to.

"Yeah, I have plans." I lie, feeling my face tighten into a fake smile, hoping he'll drop it.

Thankfully, the next customer steps up, cutting off any retort from Ned. I silently thank the universe for its intervention when I notice the customer is wearing a hooded jacket and a blue medical mask. His build is large and he has broad shoulders that could envelop my body easily. His dark eyes sparkle with a playful energy that has my palms feeling clammy. Even though his face is partially covered, his inviting presence piques my interest. I bet there's one hot man hiding under that mask.

Having dealt with my mom being sick for the last year before her death, I know all too well the lengths I would go to so she wouldn't contract anything that could make her worse. My heart pangs at wondering what he must be going through to be wearing a mask. Too many people act cruelly at the sight of a mask, snickering and judging, not understanding that they're to keep others safe. As he comes up to the counter, I can't help but wonder what he looks like because those dark eyes pin me with the most intense stare. I can feel it all the way to my bones. It sends a shiver over my skin, and a nervous flutter breaks out in my stomach.

"How can I help you?" I ask, feeling like my voice is coming out in a higher pitch than normal. Get it together, girl. You deal with hot customers all the time. But I can't help but know that there's something different about this one.

"Can I get a medium caramel mocha, no whip, with an extra shot of espresso?" Those dark eyes of his crinkle like he's smiling under his mask.

"Sure thing." I type in his order. He pays with cash, and I give him his change, having to count it more than once to make sure I didn't fuck it up by mooning over this guy. "Name?"

His eyes dart around like he's suddenly nervous. He clears his throat, and it sends a rumble through my chest.

"You can call me Max." He seems almost shy about giving me his name, and I find

that endearing. Maybe I'm affecting him like how he's affecting me. A girl can dream, I think as I go to make his drink.

As I move, I feel his eyes on my body. Watching me with that same intensity, I felt earlier.

I don't hate it.

With him paying attention, I put an extra sway in my step, feeling emboldened.

"I haven't seen you in here before. Are you just visiting?" I ask as I stir his drink, making sure all the flavors meld seamlessly. This may be a shit job, but I still take pride in my work.

He puts his hands on the counter, leaning closer. So close that his subtle pine and fresh laundry scent hit me. "I haven't really decided yet. Maybe you can help me with that."

"Oh. How so?" My stomach flips as he holds my gaze. My hand stalls, drink forgotten.

"Tell me what your favorite thing to do around here is, and I'll see if it's worth sticking around for."

A blush creeps up my neck. Is he flirting with me? A thrill shoots through my body as my mind scrambles on what to say. "My favorite thing?" I swallow hard, feeling a strong pull to this stranger.

"Yes, Bella . Tell me." His tone is almost demanding, but my heart flutters when I hear the word, Bella. Flirting. Definitely flirting.

“Okay,” I smirk. “I’ll tell you if you pull down your mask so I can see your face.”

His dark eyebrow raises as he considers me.

“I promise not to give away your secret identity.” I joke.

His knuckles knock on the countertop. “Fuck it.” He says, hooking a finger around one of the loops holding the mask on.

It feels like it takes an eternity as the rest of his face is revealed to me.

Fuck, he’s hot.

A brilliant wide smile is plastered across his face. “What do you think, Bella ? Is this good enough to hear about what you like?”

I lose all sense, too awestruck by the way this man is looking at me. Weak in the knees doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“We have customers waiting, Julia.” Ned’s grating voice scolds.

“Sorry,” I say, fumbling like an idiot for a lid to fit Max’s order. His hand wraps around mine, and it feels like time stops in this moment for a second. The noise of the coffee shop fades into the background as he stares down at me. His hand is on mine as we both clutch the cup.

“Have a good day, Julia.” The sound of him saying my name breaks the spell in one fell swoop as he covers up his face again with the mask, leaving me gaping. “Maybe you can tell me your secrets next time.” He winks, turning to go.

Next time , I think with a kernel of hope as I watch him walk out the door, taking a

piece of me with him.

CHAPTER 2

Maximo

It was a stupid idea on the night of my father's funeral. I was drunk, mourning, and filled with all the unshed anger I'd been keeping locked up for the sake of my mother. She was a wreck, utterly inconsolable, and there was nothing I could do to even try and make her feel better. She had lost the only man she had ever loved, and no amount of words were going to make up for that.

Then... cue a very drunken and ridiculous conversation with my fucked-up, and mentally unstable cousin Rocco—and something that initially was just fleeting moments of internal hatred—became real. For the past 365 days, this is all I've been able to think of. I've eaten, slept, and breathed this and nothing else, and now everything comes down to this.

So why is it that I can't seem to get the image of that stunning little blonde out of my head from a week ago? It's the weirdest thing because I've had one goal for the past year, and nothing or no one has been given a chance to mess that up. My mind has been solely focused on planning something so insane that I never thought it possible to do.

Yet here I am, thinking about the girl who practically took my breath away when I saw her. The way her hips swayed when she moved about making my coffee, how her stunning sea-foam green eyes struck me fucking dead when she looked at me and smiled.

“What’s wrong with you?” My cousin’s voice and the moment his hand smacks against the steering wheel of the car bring me out of my daydream.

“Huh?”

“Huh?” He mimics me comedically. “I asked you the same question three fucking times, and you’ve been staring into space like this is a fucking rom-com and you’re having a montage moment.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” I snort.

Shit, how long was I even out for?

“Anyway, what were you saying?”

Rocco sighs frustratedly. “Okay, so from what we already know, he leaves here...”

I nod along for a few minutes, listening to what he’s repeated to me many times before, and soon enough, my thoughts flow right back to her.

Julia.

I couldn’t take my fucking eyes off her. It was like I was in the presence of a goddess, and listen, I know how fucking stupid that sounds, but she was the most remarkably stunning woman I have ever laid my eyes on. Perfect skin that had a light dusting of a golden hue to it, which tells me she’s not one to spend a lot of time in the sun. The curvature of her body was like an upgraded version of the Greek Goddess Aphrodite.

And those lips.

I’ve kept myself closed off from everything except my family, and even women have

stopped becoming a distraction for me. I've told myself over and over again that when everything is done, and I'm able to finish what I started, then I'll settle down. I can move back home to Sicily with my family and live out my life a happy man. Until then, nothing else matters. But Julia, she was utterly unexpected.

A sharp sting cracks the back of my head, and I turn to face Rocco. "Che cazzo! "

"What the fuck has gotten into you? I've been talking to you for the past ten minutes."

"I know why the fuck we're here. You touch me like that again fucker, and I'll cut your hand off. The right one, too, so every time you jerk off with the left, it's uncomfortable." I love my cousin, but sometimes he can be a real pain in my fucking ass.

"Now, why would you say that?" He turns his body to face me in the car, dropping both hands in his lap out of frustration. We stare at each other for a beat, and I wait for the argument that is about to ensue because Rocco has a really hard time keeping his fucking mouth shut when he has something to say.

With narrowed eyes, he watches me, and slowly, the left corner of his mouth perks up into a mischievous smirk. "Who is she?" He asks, finally grinning from ear to ear.

"My private life is none of your business."

"Ahh, but there is someone. Is she hot?"

I groan, rolling my eyes and turning my head back to face the building where John Richardson and his wife Amelia live. John is the CEO of a very wealthy Medical Insurance company that has been fraudulently refusing medical claims regarding people's health for as long as I can remember.

Creating a brand-new legacy of fucking assholes for the rest of the world to just accept. Refusing to help people, denying claims, randomly deciding not to cover certain medication on the insurance people take out, causing them to be hit with a hefty fucking bill. Yeah, this guy is a real asshole.

We have been sitting here for the past six hours, like we do every night for the past two weeks, watching this cunt's every move. I want to know his daily and weekly routines better than he knows himself. I want to know his wife better than the man she's been fucking behind her husband's back.

"So, asshole...I asked you if she was hot." Rocco smacks my arm with the back of his hand.

"I heard what you said...I'm just choosing not to answer you."

"Why, afraid I'll take her for myself."

"Like I said, I'll cut your hand off. I never should've brought you in on this shit." I watch as the final light goes out inside the house, giving it a few seconds before I lift the black envelope from the glove box and step out of the car. "Okay," I wait a moment or two before starting the engine of the black Mercedes. "Let's get out of here."

Walking into Deja Brew was a little more unexpected than I thought. I swore I wouldn't come back and that pursuing anything further than a flirty interaction would be a distraction. She has no place in the situation I'm about to put myself in, and personally, I'd rather not involve her if it's at all possible. Except here I am, walking up to the counter the same as before: black coat, black hoodie, but this time a khaki green medical mask—needing to see her again.

I tap my knuckles on the counter. She turns around, slightly stumbling when she

realizes it's me, and I can't help but smile behind the mask.

"Max..." she murmurs breathlessly.

"Ah," I wink. "You remember me."

"Of course."

The light blush on her neck creeps further up her face before finally resting on her cheeks. Fuck she's stunning. I never intended to take my mask off the first time I came here, but when she looked up at me with her inquisitive and beautiful eyes, I couldn't say no.

"Medium caramel mocha, no whip, with an extra shot of espresso, right?"

I rest my forearms on the counter. "I'm impressed."

"I like my job," she shrugs one shoulder. "What can I say? But uh," she checks her watch, lifting her coat and cross-body bag from under the counter. "I'm actually just getting off?—"

Not yet, you're not. But you will.

I knew this was the time she finished work. I've watched her every night before running off to meet my cousin. It's become my nightly ritual, and considering Rocco was busy tonight, I thought I'd use this free time to my advantage.

"But Amy here can make your coffee for you."

"I didn't come for a coffee."

“Oh?” She questions, rounding the counter.

Standing up straight, I shove my hands into the pockets of my black jeans and look down at her. She’s not short, far from it, actually, but at my six feet, five inches, she only comes up to my shoulders: the perfect height, the perfect face, and the perfect body. Dio mio, even her soft voice flows towards me, and it’s...perfect.

She stops right in front of me, adjusting the collar of her coat as she puts it on, then tossing on the strap of her crossbody bag. Taking a step closer, I bend at the waist, our faces merely inches apart. She smells like lemon and sandalwood, which is different than I expected but just right for her. At this angle, the two buttons on the top of her white work blouse give enough space for me to look down and...nope.

I curve my finger around the elastic wrapped around my ear, pulling the mask away from my face, and smirk at her. “I’ve come for the secret you owe me, mio dolce, or did you forget?”

A few seconds pass, with nothing except the both of us looking into each other’s eyes. And then her lips part slightly, the space between both looking like the shape of a tiny heart. And those sea-foam green eyes are trained on me, and everything fucking melts away. I shouldn’t be here. I know there is no way she could ever understand what I’m about to do, and getting her involved is stupid. It’s reckless...it’s fucking unsafe.

But selfishly, I don’t give a single fuck. Spending five minutes in her presence the first time I came here was enough to keep me hooked for life, and honestly, I don’t think I’m ready to give that up yet. What the fuck is happening to me. Never have I been this awestruck by a woman before in my life, but this little coffee barista has?—

“Okay,” she bites the corner of her lip, and my eyes drop to focus on it.

My smile grows further, curling up the corners of my mouth until it reaches my eyes. “Where to?” I stand straighter, missing the delicate smell of her already.

Pointing toward the door, she smiles and fuck me. I’m done. I’ve heard of love at first sight, fuck, I’ve even seen it, lived through it with my parents, but this, surely not.

“Out, and then we turn right. I’d rather show you than tell you.”

Julia bites the inside of her cheek. Yeah, she’s definitely flirting.

“After you, mi Bella .” I hold my hand out palm up, allowing her to go first, and as I follow her to the front door of the cafe, I press the door open for her. I might be looking to kill someone soon, but chivalry isn’t at all dead with me.

CHAPTER 3

Julia

The cold hits us as we leave the warm coffee-scented embrace of Deja Brew. The streets are bustling with holiday shoppers and tourists hurrying to get to wherever they're going. I find myself chewing on my bottom lip, replaying how he called me 'bella' again. I admit that ever since he was in here, I wondered if I would ever see him again. I thought I'd seen him a few times, but it always turned out not to be him.

As we walk, I can't help but notice how tall he is. I rarely find someone that can handle my height. They usually make some joke and then pick a small, petite girl they can swing around with ease.

He follows my lead down a route I've taken many times before.

"So, you're really not going to tell me where we're going?" He asks, mask back over his face.

"You're just going to have to trust me."

"It's Rockefeller Center, isn't it?"

"Nope. That's the other direction." I smirk as we turn down the next street. So, he was a visitor, after all. I tuck that information away, greedy for more details about my masked man.

As I lead him to my secret place, we fall into a lockstep with each other. A place that's served as therapy more times in the last year since losing my mother than I could count.

My mom was all the family I had left, and when MS dug its claws into her, I was forced to watch her wither away before my eyes. Praying to the universe for a miracle that would let me have more time with her.

But either the universe wasn't listening, or they didn't give a shit because she was taken far too soon. Leaving me in a pile of debt that had me quitting NYU and working several jobs to make ends meet.

"Can I ask why you wear the mask?" I venture, curiosity burning to know all I can about Max.

He clears his throat, and I see I've hit a nerve. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." I rush out, worried that I've offended him.

"No, it's okay. It's just my mom. She's been sick since my father passed last year. I already lost my father. I don't want to lose her, too."

My heart squeezes at his thoughtfulness. "I'm sorry for your loss. I know what it's like to lose a parent." He stops me, grabbing my wrist and turning me to face him. The heat from his surprisingly gentle touch travels up my arm as his dark brown eyes pin me to where I stand. He tucks a stray hair behind my ear, and it takes enormous effort not to crumple from my weak, trembling knees. If anyone doubts whether the expression 'weak in the knees' actually exists, I can assure them that it does.

"You should not have had to experience such a loss." He says, voice low and almost angry.

Grief can be like that. Sudden and full of rage.

I feel so seen by this man that I've known for only a handful of minutes that it should unnerve me. But it doesn't. Maybe it's my loneliness or my still grieving heart, but I can't help but feel entirely safe and understood by him.

"We're here," I say, tugging at his jacket so that he'll follow me.

A frown burrows deep onto his face, and then he laughs as he realizes where I've taken him.

"Laser tag?" Those dark eyes of his dance with delight.

I shrug my shoulder. "It's my favorite way to let off some steam after a hard day. I love this place."

"I promise you there are much more fun ways to let off some steam." He says with a wink, and my stomach flips as I catch his meaning. "But this is good, too. I don't think I've played in years."

The place is mostly empty, save for a group of teenage girls here for a birthday party with a few moms who look like they'd rather be anywhere else but here. The place smells like stale popcorn and sweat, but I can't help but feel instantly comforted by the familiarity.

"Julia. Nice to see you again." The owner greets me from behind the counter.

"Hey, Joe. How's the wife?" He's an older man in his early seventies with grey, bushy eyebrows and a shiny bald head.

"She's on a meatball kick. Meatball subs, meatball spaghetti, breakfast meatballs. I

tell you, if I never see another meatball again, I'll be a happy man." He pats his prominent belly, and I laugh.

"Two, please," I say as I'm about to pay, but Max stops me.

"My pleasure." He says, and a little intrusive thought answers, I'd love to know what gives you pleasure. I mentally smack myself.

Joe winks at me and wiggles his eyebrows, and a flood of heat rises to the apples of my cheeks. I never bring anyone here. It's my sacred space—where I can forget about the world for twenty minutes and just be.

We grab our gear, locking the pads around our chests as they light up in a bright neon blue. The teenage girls keep looking at us and whispering as they put their neon red vests on. It's clear they find him just as hot as I do by the way they keep checking him out.

"I think you have a fan base over there," I say, gesturing to the girls.

"I'm fine with the one I have here." He says, grabbing the laser tag gun, and I bloom underneath his praise. The lights start flashing as the countdown begins.

"You ready?" I ask, getting in position and raising my gun.

"You bet your ass I am."

The buzzer sounds, announcing the game has begun. The doors open wide, and we run at full speed into a maze of obstacles as all hell breaks loose.

Shrieks from the girls rain down on us as lights flicker all around.

“Up here!” I direct, knowing the layout by heart. He follows closely behind, shielding my back from an oncoming attack. The sound of automated gunfire echoes in the enclosed space, and my face breaks out with a wide smile. I fucking love this shit.

The adrenaline. The rush. Not knowing what happens next.

I aim at some of the girls below and light them up before they even have a chance to take cover.

“They’re up there!” The girls scream. We duck just in time to avoid their fire.

“Follow me,” I say, grabbing him by the vest.

We find an alcove and crouch down, waiting for the girls to make their way up to us. We can see them clearly from where we are, and I take a moment to look at Max.

He’s staring at me, head tilted, and eyes crinkled like he’s smiling under that mask of his. It feels almost like he’s admiring me. We crouch down together in the dark, inches away from each other. Hiding from the incoming attack.

“You are a fucking surprise, Julia.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It’s a really good thing.”

His eyes are locked with mine, and I feel myself pulled to him. The chaos of the game fades into the background. All that exists is him and I.

He leans forward, and I have the urge to tug his mask down and kiss him. My eyes track to where it sits on his face, and he inhales sharply. Electricity crackles between

us the closer he gets to me.

Suddenly, he turns and aims at one of the girls that have snuck up on us, hitting her square in the chest. It flashes red.

“Good aim,” I say, rushing behind a half wall. A patter of feet rumbles the ground beneath us. They’re closing in on our location.

He spins, looking like something out of a video game, and takes out each of the girls, shot after shot.

Holy shit.

I stand mouth agape, watching them fall one by one as he racks up the points.

One of the girls angrily points her gun at me, and I know I’m toast.

But before she can hit me, he grabs me by the waist and spins, shielding me from the assault. His vest flashes blue with the hit, and the mask covering his face hangs off one of his ears, letting me see his full smile.

A loud buzzer chimes throughout the room, and the lights slowly turn on.

Game over.

CHAPTER 4

Maximo

Yep. I'm fucking screwed.

Not a single part of me is on the right path, and the reason for that...is Julia. Her special place, laser tag. Completely unexpected but also utterly her. And even though this is the second time I've seen her, it feels like she's been in my life forever, as though there has been no time between us at all.

It's irritating the life out of me because even though it's clear that she genuinely believes me to be visiting, I'm not. When my mother met my father on holiday to Sicily with her friends, they fell in love, and even though it was two weeks, he couldn't bear to let her go. In the end, he packed everything up and came home with her. After a few short months, she became pregnant with me, they got married, and the rest is history. Or so my angelic mother tells me.

I spent half of my childhood living here. My friends, school, first job, everything was here, and when my father got a job in Chicago, we up and left. Leaving everything behind to build a new life, a better life for all of us. But she doesn't need to know that.

When she told me about losing her mother to MS, an ache swept through me in a way that I couldn't decipher. To her or to myself. I genuinely believed that seeing her today would confirm that it was nothing but a simple lapse in judgment on my part, and what I felt with her in that fucking coffee shop was nothing more than a fleeting

moment.

Something that most people have once in their life, but that means absolutely nothing in the grand scheme of things. Except it wasn't. The feeling deep within my gut doesn't even come close to it. I could walk away now, never lay eyes on her again, do what I must do, and then head back to my home country. Sicily. Where my mother and the rest of my family are now. She's moved in with my aunts after my father's passing, as they've accepted her as one of their own. A part of the family. And family always looks out for each other, at least ours does.

I haven't seen her in a year, and I miss all of them dearly. But I had to do this. There was no other way to rid my mind, body, and soul of the hatred of what my father suffered and what we all suffer continuously to this day.

"Max?"

Her sultry voice brings me back to the present, and I turn to face her. "Sorry, Bella, what did you say?"

Shit, was I daydreaming again?

A sweet-sounding giggle leaves her lips, and I'm overcome by a need to feel its vibration against my own. "I asked if you had fun."

"I did," I smile beneath my khaki mask. "You?"

Her bright smile warms my heart, and fuck, I want to kiss her so badly. I was willing to kiss her during the game, but that group of girls found us and there just wasn't enough time to do it.

"I always have fun there. My parents used to take me when I was little. But when I

reached eight, it stopped.” She shrugs.

“Why?”

She rakes her teeth over her plump bottom lip, and I groan internally. Fuuuck.

“Uh, well...” she clears her throat, placing her hands into her jacket as we walk side by side. “My father died on his second tour to Afghanistan, and my mother was never the same after that.” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as though talking about him hurts too much.

I know the feeling.

“It’s funny,” her lips tighten into a fine line.

“How so?” I press further.

As she looks up at me, her bright eyes bore into me like a drill, as though they see everything all at once.

“He spent years serving his country, spending time away from his family because the only thing that held a close second to us was fighting for the protection and safety of America.” She lets out a ragged breath, focusing back on the ground. “And when it happened, the government couldn’t give a flying fuck. And the sad thing is nobody will even know his name.”

“What is it?”

“Alberto Richard Contostavlos. Greek.”

“Even if nobody else does...I will.”

Julia's eyes meet mine again, and something passes over her face that I can't quite place. Affection, gratefulness...something. As the Christmas lights decorate her already stunning features, a slow smile creeps up her face. Warm and inviting. One that I can't help but mimic because it's just too beautiful to pass up.

"Thank you." She responds, so quiet I almost miss it. Stopping, she turns to face me. Her hand lifts, and she points her index finger to her apartment. "Well, uh...this is me."

I look up. The bright red silk bow decorating the entryway at the top of the stairs is exactly what I expect to see on the building she lives in. As I scope the outskirts of the place, looking up and over the brickwork, my eyes land on a window directly in the center covered with more festive decorations. It was almost as though Santa himself threw up over it.

I chuckle, "Let me guess." I focus back on her and jut my chin to it. "That's yours?"

"No," a light blush creeps up her face, highlighting the apples of her cheeks as she purses both her lips to the right. Desperately trying not to be embarrassed. I watch her ascend three steps up the stone staircase before she turns around. "Okay, so it's mine. I like Christmas. I know it's weird, and it looks like Santa and his elves threw up over the framework, but I?—"

She's babbling, and fuck me if it isn't the cutest thing I've come to witness in my life thus far. I've wanted to kiss her from the moment I laid eyes on her, and if tonight is the last time I see her, I want to make it count.

"I just like the feel of Christmas, and since I live alone?—"

Before I even know what I'm doing, I close the space between us, hook my finger around the elastic covering my ear, and tug it off. She's the perfect height for me

now, and for some unknown fucking reason, I can't stop myself from kissing her.

The moment my lips touch hers, she stills. And I wonder if I've made a grave mistake. I should've fucking asked her. What's wrong with me? I might be about to do something that millions of people in the world would frown upon, but I never take from a woman without asking for consent.

I pull back slightly, "Shit," I murmur. "Sorry, I?—"

Her hand wraps around the back of my neck and pulls me closer to her. The pillowy soft skin of her lips, the smell of her shower gel that still lingers on her body, the delicate hum of enjoyment that seeps from her mouth...it's intoxicating. She's intoxicating. Gathering her in my arms, I cup her jaw, and she arches her body into me.

Fuck.

Slipping my tongue out, I glide it along the seam of her mouth, and she willingly opens up to me, offering herself to me so sweetly. As I slide my tongue against hers, her manicured nails dig into the nape of my neck as she grips the black curls. The taste of peppermint tea still lingers on her tongue as I slide mine against it and taste her.

Both of us gently fight for control of the kiss. The breathlessness of her moan crashes over me, sending a bolt of electricity to my cock. I have to fight myself not to follow her up to her apartment and bend her over the nearest surface. Fucking the cuteness right out of her.

Reluctantly, I step back from her and glide my thumb over her swollen bottom lip, letting it pop free. My fingers move over her cheek, tucking the stray blonde hairs from her French plait neatly behind her ear.

“Thank you.”

“For?” She smiles as though that’s the first time she’s ever heard those words from another person.

“Tonight, it was great.” My voice is gruff and low. I manage to keep my composure as I speak.

“You’re welcome.” She chews her lip again.

I press another soft kiss to her mouth before moving mine to the shell of her ear. The words fall from my lips in a language she won’t understand. “Un’altra vita, forse.”

Before descending the steps, I watch the smile on her face grow, but confusion laces her eyes. I have to go. I can’t bring her into what I’m about to do. I won’t ruin her life, too. And with those thoughts in my head, I cover my face back up with the khaki fabric of the medical mask and leave her behind me.

Hating myself more with every step I take.

CHAPTER 5

Julia

My head is spinning from that kiss. I'm mentally kicking myself for not getting his number. Or maybe he didn't want mine. What was it that he said in my ear before he left? Un'altra vita, forse.

What does that even mean?

The twinkling lights of my Christmas décor greet me. I pat a fat dancing Santa on the head as it starts singing "Rocking Around the Christmas Tree" while shaking its ass, getting set off by the motion sensor. I smile, thinking of all the times my mom and I would sing along and dance just like it. Butts out and arms swinging.

God, I miss her.

The holidays are always hard, but without her presence I'm barely holding it together.

A pile of past-due bills is spread out on the small TV tray that doubles as my kitchen table. The apartment I rent out is tiny, even by New York standards. But it's the only home I have, and I try to make the cramped space as happy as I can manage.

My lips still tingle with the phantom of his kiss as I kick off my shoes and sink into my bed. I don't think I've ever been kissed like that. It was as if every neuron had a celebration of fireworks inside my body the moment his lips met mine.

The entire evening was so unexpected. I'd planned to veg out and watch some Netflix on my laptop, but this was infinitely better.

I take my phone out and text my friend, Tasha. She'd been mercilessly teasing me for crushing on the stranger when I told her.

Girl. Guess what?

I see three dots appear immediately, and with a Cheshire grin-like smile, I type out the details of the date. Wait, was it a date?

He paid, and he kissed me goodnight.

But still, I don't have his number, and he didn't ask for mine.

Worrying my bottom lip, I begin to overanalyze every detail, like the way he grabbed me so possessively at the laser tag place and used his body as a shield. Talk about a swoon-worthy moment.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes, and an incoming FaceTime request blares at me.

"Bitch, spill," Tasha says, walking around with her hair hidden by a towel. It's clear she's just popped out of the shower and is about to do her nightly skin care. Tasha has that kind of glazed donut-looking skin that people pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to obtain.

"Okay, so remember that guy?"

"Mr. Face Mask?" She asks while globbing on a dollop of moisturizer.

"That's the one." My friends are always quick to nickname anyone I'm remotely

interested in. There's been the fish guy who only wanted to order fish for every date, even breakfast, for me and him. Then there was Mr. Butcrack, who had the unfortunate displeasure of showing his ass every time he bent over. And we can't forget about my personal favorite, Baby Knees. A guy who always wore jeans until he took me to the beach, where I saw two very distinct-looking knees staring at me. I covertly took a picture that day and sent it to Tasha, asking her if I was crazy or if his knees looked like two very angry baby faces glaring at me. The verdict? I was not, in fact, crazy.

"He came back to Deja Brew?" She asks.

"He did, and I took him to laser tag." I let that information settle, and Tasha clearly understands the gravity of what I had just said. She's staring at me open-mouthed with shock.

"You haven't even taken me there."

"I know!"

She stares at me like she's piecing together a puzzle. "Wow, so what did Mr. Facemask do to earn such an outing?"

"Well, his name is Max."

"We're real naming this guy? This is serious. Hold on, I have to sit down."

She sits and gives me her full attention.

I regale her with the details, catching her up, and she is rapt.

"But then he didn't ask for my number."

“He could have been nervous.” She offers, and it does little to calm my anxiety over it.

“True,” I say warily.

“But he knows where you work. With a night like that, I’m sure he’ll be back in soon.”

After chatting for a few more minutes, we hang up, and her words linger. I hate to admit how desperately I want that to be true.

Before I go to sleep after getting ready for bed, I search for the words he spoke to me. After misspelling it several times, I try speaking it into my phone. Immediately, a host of results pop up and I zero in on the first translation I see. “In another life, maybe.”

Any hope I had of seeing him again turns to dust, and my heart shatters. He doesn’t think we’ll work out. Tears sting at the corner of my eyes, and I scold myself for getting so emotionally attached to a guy I’ve just met, taking him to my sacred space. What was I thinking?

Frustration follows me, and I know no matter how much I try to boost my self-confidence, telling myself I’m better off, there’s still a voice wondering why he thinks I’m not good enough for this life.

CHAPTER 6

Maximo

ONE WEEK LATER

It's been a week since I kissed her, knowing full well that I needed to stay away from her. It's not right, and fuck me...it isn't fair. Did that stop me from watching her through the tinted windows of my car? No. Has the memory of her soft lips on mine halted any sexual thoughts I've had about her? Also no. The sad look on her face as she watched the door to the coffee shop she works in, waiting for me to walk in, about killed me.

Every time the small bell above the framework of the door dinged, I saw the excitement drain from her eyes as she realized it was not the face she wanted to see. Every night I've been late to meet up with my cousin, and every night he scolds me about the same fucking shit. I knew not going back to her would be impossible, especially with her smile and big doe eyes.

The night I walked away from her, I promised myself I would keep my distance, yet again, I can't seem to do it. I can't afford to get distracted. I can't afford to let the plan I've worked so heavily on go to waste.

Rocco nudges me, holding his cigarette in front of me, pinched between his thumb and forefinger, "Here, take a drag. It will calm your nerves."

I shake my head, pushing his hand away from my face and grimacing. "Smoking is

bad for you. Besides, every cigarette you have takes?—”

“Thirty minutes off your life. I know.” He rolls his eyes, and I chuckle as he finishes my sentence in a feminine, nagging tone. “You sure you want to do this, cugino ?”

I try to quell the anger rising in my stomach, “ Come dio mi è testimone.” I repeat the words my mother would always say to me when I would act up as a kid ‘As God is my witness.’” God, I miss her, but I’ll be home soon. I need a few more weeks. That’s all. Just to make sure everything is done and then I can fly home.

“ Andiamo,” Rocco taps my shoulder, flicking the cigarette from his fingers and out the car window. Watching as that sick motherfucker leaves the office building and climbs into his car. We know his route home like the back of our hands, but tonight, he won’t make it. Rocco starts the car, swiftly turning the steering wheel and pulling out of the parking space. John is completely unaware of his surroundings, scrolling through his phone with a smile on his face, I wanna punch it off—no doubt looking at all the emails of dying people that are begging for his help.

“We need to make this quick,” I tell my cousin, “I don’t want to be seen by anyone. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, we are in this together. You fucking know that. After what they did, there’s no way I’m messing this up.”

“Hm.” I hum in response. Snorting a laugh when I look at him, my gaze lingering for a moment.

“What?” He asks, confusion marring his face.

“You look like Uncle Alfredo in that fucking suit.”

“Uh, fuck you very much, Alfredo was a pervert.”

“Well, if the suit fits.” I chuckle louder. “And by the looks of that fake Armani suit...it does.”

“ Vafanculo! This isn’t a fake suit. It’s real!”

“Bullshit. Where did you snag it from?”

Rocco clears his throat and makes the universal Italian hand signal, “From Uncle Alfredo.”

My eyes widened briefly before we both burst into laughter.

“What the fuck am I doing?” I groan to nobody but myself. I drop my head back against the headrest of the car seat, close my eyes, and think back over the last four hours with Rocco. After he dropped me off in the tree line, I scrambled into it, making sure to cover my presence in as much of the darkness as possible. I didn’t want to be seen, as this was our only chance. If this didn’t work, then a more standard way of kidnapping would be on the cards.

But thankfully, Lady Luck was on our side tonight. While my cousin had the hood of his car up, fake smoke billowing from it, wearing a suit that made him look decent—fuck if I’d tell him that, though, we waited. After a few lonely minutes on the road, John Richardson came to a stop in his car. He rolled down his passenger side window as he passed and leaned forward.

“Hey there!” He called with a smile and concern on his face, “Need some help?”

My cousin played the part beautifully, complaining about car trouble while looking as though he was worth a million dollars had that fucking piece of shit hooked. John

hopped out of his half-a-million Rolls Royce Phantom and came to the aid of a man he believed to be rich and powerful...just like him.

When he finally realized what was going on, it was far too late. Rocco cracked him in the jaw so hard that he went down like a sack of shit. “Shall we give him some cement boots and drop him in the river?”

I snort at the memory of our exchange.

“ Stai bene? ”

“What?”

“We’re not Cosa Nostra, cousin.”

Rocco held his hands up in surrender. “We’re from Sicily, that’s all I’m saying. You don’t know what our fathers were into.”

Clapping him on the back, I stepped over John Richardson’s body and chuckled. “You’ve been watching far too much Goodfellas. Your mother owns a restaurant, and your father a fucking vineyard.”

“Dead bodies in barrels, and some in pies.”

“ Dio mio.”

Pulling a silver coin from my pocket, I tossed it, caught it, and flipped it onto the back of my hand. “Heads or tails?” I asked him. The result of the coin flip would decide what end of the body we got to hoist up and stuff into the trunk.

“Heads.” He shrugged after lighting another cigarette.

“Tails. You got the ass end.”

“Fuck!”

Shaking my head, I smile further at everything.

I think back to how we took John to an abandoned building just off the Cedarwood Forest, tied him up, blindfolded him, and had two of my father’s friends watch him. Yeah, I can see why Rocco believes we could be made men. For all intents and purposes, I was planning to go home to the cabin my father still owns on Lake Gardini, which is about a three-hour drive north of here, but instead...that’s right...I’m here...with my head pressed up against the cool glass of the tinted driver’s side window, looking up at flashing Christmas lights.

It’s 10 p.m., and I know she’s home. I can see the TV flickering through the little space of her apartment window that’s not covered in festive décor. Seriously, what is it with this woman that I can’t seem to stay away from. I mean, sure, she’s beautiful. Scratch that she’s fucking stunning. Her laugh is infectious, her shapely curves I can’t keep my eyes off of, and those soft little whimpers she made when I kissed her a week ago made me want to find out just how delicate they would sound coming from underneath me.

Fuck...I’m truly fucked!

“Just stay in the car,” I tell myself. “In fact, start the car.” After a few more seconds, I groan. “Fuck it.”

Jumping out of the car, I search the ground and find a few small stones, launching them up at her window. They clink against the pane of glass, and when she doesn’t answer the first few times, I collect more and keep throwing. She finally pushes the window up as soon as the sixth stone is thrown, leaning out.

I knew she was gonna be pissed at me. Christ, I walked away from her without even so much as giving her my number.

It was the right thing to do.

So why do I feel so shitty about it?

She doesn't say anything for a beat. She just stares down at me. One of her perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted up, watching further, waiting for me to say something, anything.

"Oh, would you look at that! It's Mask Guy!" Another woman says after popping her head out next to Julia. "See, I told you he'd come back." She smacks her arm playfully.

"Shut up!" Julia snaps, and I can't hide the smirk on my face. "I'm mad at you." She calls down to me.

Pulling my mask off my face completely, I smile back. "Yeah, I'm mad at me too, Bella."

"Yeah, okay, you said he was hot, but you didn't say he was that hot!" Her friend barks in shock. "Hey, are you some kind of GQ model or...hey...Julia!"

The girl protests continually while my girl pushes her back into the window and out of sight.

My girl?

"You think I'm hot?"

“Borderline...attractive, I guess.”

“Better than Baby Knees!” Her friend screams from inside.

“Baby knees?” I question.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s an alcoholic. She missed her AA meeting today, and I’m her sponsor.”

Lifting my hand, I rub it over my chin. Christ, my cheeks hurt. I don’t think I’ve smiled this much since...well...it’s been a long time. The door adjacent to me bursts open, and her flushed and breathless friend stands there with a grin on her face the size of Manhattan.

“Hey, Hot Mask Guy, get over here.” She flaps her hand, calling me over.

“Tasha, you whore, I’m going to kill you!”

“Hey, would you shut up. It’s late!” A neighbor calls out from the adjacent window.

“You shut up fucker! If I have to listen to the fake screams of the women you bring home, you can listen to my voice dickhead!”

“Fake screams? Come over here, and I’ll show you they’re not fake.”

“Fuck you Miller, I wouldn’t touch you with this guy’s dick. Go inside!”

I laugh then, hard. My girl has a potty mouth.

My girl. Jesus Christ, I said it again.

As I close the space between myself and her friend, Tasha, I hop the final steps two by two. Stopping in front of her, she holds out her hand.

“Phone.” She demands. I unlock it and hand it to her, and she begins punching in a few numbers before eventually handing it back. “It’s girls’ night, so...no boys allowed. But, if you hurt her, I’ll shoot you directly between the fucking eyes, and nobody will find you, capiche?”

“Okay.”

“Trust me, I have a concealed weapon and a shovel. I doubt anyone would miss you.”

Leaning forward, I place a gentle kiss on her cheek. “I promise. She’s safe with me.”

But is she?

Descending the steps, I hold my phone up to her. “I’ll text you.” Even from here, I can see how her cheeks blush, and she fights the grin, forcing its way onto her angelic face. “I have a few things to do, but are you free this weekend?”

She shrugs. “Maybe. I think I’m working.”

“Call in sick.”

“I can’t?—”

I pin her with a stare. “Call. In. Sick. I want to show you my special place.”

“Is it between your legs?” Tasha cackles.

“Tasha!” Julia squawks.

I don't give either of them an answer. I yank open the driver's side door and jump into the car, slamming it closed. The engine roars to life as I put it in drive and pull out of the parking space.

Maximo Rossi, you're in big fucking trouble.

CHAPTER 7

Julia

“Oh my God! He’s hot, hot.” Tasha exclaims once we’re back inside. My face is tomato red from blushing so hard.

“Shut up!” I throw a pillow at her, and it smacks her right in the stomach.

“Julia and Mask Guy, sitting in a tree?—”

A loud knock comes from the wall. “Shut up in there! I’m trying to sleep!”

I glare at Tasha, and she puts her hands up in surrender.

Love Actually continues to play on the TV. “Oh no, we missed the good part. Rewind it.” I say, not wanting to miss Hugh Grant dancing around like an idiot.

My phone lights up with an incoming text, and I can’t help but smile. Despite being angry at him and having been plagued with self-doubt, I can’t resist giving him another chance.

You looked beautiful tonight, Bella.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach as I read those words. I’m not wearing anything special—flannel pajamas, and my hair is thrown up in a bun. If he had come thirty minutes earlier, he would have been greeted by me in a green-colored face mask,

though. I cringe at the thought.

Biting my bottom lip, I type out a reply. Erasing it and retyping several times before I settle on what to say back.

And you looked like someone I haven't seen in a week.

"Tell him you've been dreaming about his dick every night," Tasha says, grabbing a fistful of white cheddar popcorn.

I roll my eyes and hit send.

Have you been counting the days? I know I have.

Tasha crams her face next to mine and reads the message he's sent back.

"Oh, girl. You're in big trouble." She cackles. I push her off me and put my phone away.

In the morning, my phone is filled with news of a missing CEO for some company as I scroll past stupid ads for several workout machines. Apparently, my algorithm is trying to tell me something. Scowling, I toss my phone onto the bed and brush my teeth. I have a shift at a bar in Midtown in a half-hour that I can't be late for. They asked me to fill in for the lunch rush and the tips I get are too good to pass up.

Max and I have been texting most of the night and into the morning. It's mostly nonsense stuff, but there's an undercurrent and a promise of something more.

As the day passes, the missing CEO is all anyone can talk about. Wild theories fly, getting crazier by the second. They release grainy footage of the incident from a nearby building that only spurs on the speculation. It's funny to me that with all the

advances in technology, we still have shitty footage like this when they want to catch someone.

I've been too busy taking orders and fighting the ache in my feet to pay too much attention, but what I do catch of the conversations is entertaining. There's no love lost between me and this CEO, especially after I found out what he was CEO of. Personal experience with being denied claims is why I'm in this mess in the first place—working as hard as I do at multiple jobs just to make ends meet, all because of my late mom's medical debt.

Thankfully, Max hasn't pressed me anymore about calling off this weekend. As much as I want to, there's no way I can make rent if I do. He might be hot, but he's not 'lose my apartment' hot. Though, I do want to see him again. It's tempting. I'll give him that.

I'd love just to say fuck it and see where he'd take me.

He seems like the type of guy who would plan things out meticulously.

At the end of my shift, I realize I have only fifteen minutes to dash across town to make it in time for my shift at Deja Brew.

Fuck.

It's freezing, and I have to bypass a slew of gawking holiday shoppers who are clogging up the sidewalk. I go as fast as my legs will carry me, huffing all the way, silently cursing myself for not being in better shape. Those stupid ads my phone was showing me earlier are starting to make a lot more sense as a sharp pain stabs me in my side from running.

I'm a wheezing, sweaty mess by the time I make it to Deja Brew. Only Ned's angry

face tells me I didn't make it on time.

"Julia, a word." He says, gesturing to the cramped office.

The space is only big enough for two chairs, and when he closes the door, a bright overhead light fizzles loudly, shutting out the noise from the café.

I take off my beanie hat and twist it between my fingers. "Ned, I'm so?—"

He puts his hand up and sits across from me, knees knocking against mine. I recoil and don't miss the flash of annoyance that crosses his face.

"This is the sixth time, Julia. I can't keep making allowances if you're not able to get to work on time."

"I—"

"No excuses this time. I told you what would happen if you were late again."

My heartbeat quickens, and my already sweaty body feels like it will drown itself if it sweats anymore. A sense of dread fills me as he avoids my eyes.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go." The words hit me like he's just carried out a death sentence.

"Please. I'm sorry. I?—"

"Get your things and go," Ned says quickly, not even allowing me to defend myself.

"You can pick up your last check by the end of the week."

As I squeeze past him, he grabs me by the wrist. His skin feels clammy and wrong.

“But I hope this doesn’t change anything between us.”

My mouth drops open. “What?”

“I had been hoping to ask you out sometime, and now that I’m no longer your manager, I can.”

My eyes go wide as I yank my wrist away. “Did you seriously just fire me so you could ask me out?”

“Well, no, but I?—”

“And you thought I would say yes?” I can hear the shrill cadence in my voice getting louder. But I’ve reached a level of rage that cannot be contained.

“Julia, we’ve been flirting for months. I thought you would be pleased.” He looks genuinely confused, and I laugh.

“What the fuck, dude? I was just being polite!” Please save me from the audacity of entitled pricks who use their position of power to get what they want.

I storm out of the office and knock over a tray of piping hot coffee on my way out, shocking my former co-workers and a slew of customers waiting in line.

I’m too pissed to care what they think. I needed this job. Once I’m back out on the sidewalk, reality hits me. I’m so fucking screwed.

My fingers tremble, and I find myself hitting call before I know what I’m doing. Instinctively, I picked Max’s name from my contacts, needing to hear his voice.

It rings in my ear as I wait for him to pick up. I just hope he’s not busy.

CHAPTER 8

Maximo

My fist hits the side of John's cheek with a crushing blow, one that travels up my arm and into my chest. This is the first time I've touched him since I've had him tied up and locked away. The news is going insane with security footage of Rocco and me. Albeit grainy, it's still out there in the world. There must have been a camera that we missed when doing our recon.

I mean, what did the cops and newscasters think would happen?

It's funny to think they truly believed that people would be sad about this man going missing. He's disgusting, vile, and completely deserving of what's coming to him.

"Please," he babbles, "just let me go."

"I thought about that," I reply darkly. "But then I remembered what a fucking piece of shit you are."

"I have a wife," he cries.

"And all the people you denied the right of healthcare to did too. Kids, husbands, fathers, and sons. Women and children that were someone's wives, daughters."

"Max, can we just kill him already? I have Love Actually to get home to."

My phone starts blaring from the table behind me.

“Who’s Julia?” Rocco asks with humor lacing his tone.

Shit.

Turning around, I storm over to him and snatch it out of his hand. I slide my thumb along the screen and answer it.

“Bella —”

“Bella, huh?” Rocco chuckles.

I smack him on the back of the head, putting some distance between us. “I’m kind of—” That’s when I hear her crying. “Julia, what’s wrong?”

“He...fuck...I just got fired.”

“What?” I exclaim, shocked.

“I was late from my second job, and he...fuck!”

I turn to face Rocco, my eyes flicking between him and John. This really isn’t the right time for me to be taking this call. Shit.

“That motherfucker fired me and then had the audacity to ask me out on a fucking date!”

My body stills at her words.

“God, he’s such a greasy ass?—”

“Julia, what did you just say?”

“My boss, Ned, he fired me. Are you busy? Did I?—”

“You didn’t interrupt anything. You’re more important than what I have going on. But I got the part where you said he fired you. It was the second part I want you to repeat.”

“Oh...yeah, uh, he fired me, and as I was getting up to leave, he grabbed my wrist and asked me out. Slime ball. He claimed I’d been flirting with him for a while. What is it with men? Why can’t a woman just be nice without them thinking there is something behind it, as though they’re entitled to?—”

Her babbling filters off into the distance, and my whole body goes rigid. That prick fired her and then thought it would be a great idea to put it on her like that was going to make her feel better. It’s only when my cousin walks beside me, resting his hand on my shoulder, that I realize how tight I’m clenching my fist.

The pinch between his brows tells me he’s just as confused as I am at this moment. How can I be so possessive over this girl—correction woman—that I’m filled with rage thinking about another man touching her.

“Max?” Her sweet voice brings me out of my rage-filled stupor.

“I’m right here, Bella. Where are you now?”

The faint honking of New York traffic blares in the background, and I hope she’s not standing outside the coffee shop crying.

“I’m heading home. I need to figure out a way to?—”

“I’m on my way. I’ll meet you at yours, don’t go anywhere.”

“Wait, Max, I?—”

I don’t let her finish, ending the call and shoving my phone in the back pocket of my black jeans. I rush over to my backpack and snatch the black coat from the back of the wooden chair.

“Sorry, but where the fuck are you going?” Rocco calls from behind me.

“I’ll be back.” I groan. I’m pissed, not because she called me, not because I have to leave here without finishing this cunt off, but because the overwhelming need to hold her in my arms is scaring the fucking shit out of me. I barely know anything about this woman, and I’m ready to beat the shit out of some guy for her.

“You have got to be shitting me!” Rocco bellows, “You’re leaving here for a piece of ass?”

I turn around, and the look on my face is enough to make him back off. Holding up his hands, he takes a step back in surrender. Glancing at my watch, I see it’s 6 p.m. “Give me a couple of hours, stay here,” I point, “watch him.”

“Where the fuck is he going to go?”

“Just...look, I’ll be back at ten.”

“I’ve never seen you like?—”

“I’m not interested.” I brush past him, shucking on my coat and throwing my backpack over my right shoulder. Fishing the keys to my Mercedes out of the pocket of my black coat, I press the button, unlocking the car before I slide inside and slam

the door shut.

I knew this would happen.

But not a single part of me hates that I'll be with her soon enough.

I lock the car as I jump out of it, jog across the road to Deja Brew, and walk inside. The bright smile of the teenage boy standing behind the counter does nothing to quell my frustration.

"Hello sir, welcome to Dej?—"

"Can I speak to Ned?"

"Y-yeah, sure." He turns to the back room in search of him. After waiting a few moments, he finally emerges with Ned hot on his heels. "This is the manager."

"Yes, how can I help you, sir?" He presses his hands to the counter, and before I have a chance to second guess my actions, both my hands fist into the gray-toned white shirt he's wearing and I drag him over the counter. His body flails and knocks off the cake stand and the tip jar. Coins scatter to the floor as I hang him halfway over the wood.

The few people in the coffee shop remain stock still, and the three workers gawk at us both. "Do you know what pisses me off, Ned?"

"N-no..."

What a fucking pussy.

"When you fire someone, then ask to date them...knowing she's working two jobs,

and you won't even give her a little...leeway?"

"Listen, I-I?—"

"Shut up!" I shout. "You're gonna call her."

"She's been late s-six times...I c-can't keep letting her?—"

I chuckle then, but none of this is funny. I'm doing something I really shouldn't be, and if the cops get called on me, my whole plan goes to fucking shit, but I can't seem to stop myself.

"Call her!" I bellow.

Frantically, Ned reaches for his phone, going into the contacts list and scrolling until he finds Julia's name. "What do you want me to say?"

"You're going to tell her you made a mistake, that you're sorry...and that she can take the week off to rest. Put the fucking call on speaker, too, while you're fucking at it!"

He calls her, pressing the button so I can hear the call. "What, Ned?"

"J-Julia...I made a mistake." He eyes me warily, my hands gripped even tighter in his cheap cotton shirt. "I'd like for you to come back. I was a little bit hasty and...yeah."

"Fuck you, Ned. You're an asshole!"

I smile at her foul language, clearly done with his shit.

"Look, I'm in a tight spot right now, and I'm...I'm sorry, okay," he blinks profusely,

and I nod once. Raising an eyebrow at him. “Oh, and take the week off...as an apology...f-full pay, of course.”

“I want a raise.”

“Julia, I can’t?—”

I shake him, bringing my face so close to his that I can practically smell his fear, and he panics.

“A-all right, we can talk about it when you’re back off your uh...break.”

The line goes dead, and I drag him the rest of the way over the counter. I stand him up straight, run my hands over his shoulders, and straighten his now-crumpled shirt.

“Let me tell you one thing, Ned, if Julia mentions any more bullshit to me about you touching her, flirting with her, or even being in the same room with her alone...” I lean in closer to his ear, speaking as low as possible, “I’ll burn your fucking shop down.”

Ned begins to nod profusely as I step back, his eyes wide and panic-stricken. I turn to the rest of the workers. “He touches any of the women here. Tell Julia and she will relay it back to me.”

Flashing them a decadent smile, I walk backward until my back hits the glass door, and I walk out onto the street.

Now it’s time to cheer up my girl.

CHAPTER 9

Julia

My eyes are swollen by the time I make it home. The tears have frozen onto my face, and my nose is bright red. The phone call from Ned throws me, and I wonder what could have changed his mind. I'm too stunned to ask questions, feeling all the raw emotions from the day lingering close to the surface.

When I arrive home, Max is standing outside my door holding four boxes of Domino's pizza, leaning against the brick, one foot on the wall bent at the knee to hold him up. My heart surges at the sight of him. He came.

I can hear Tasha somewhere saying, "Not yet, he didn't." and I break into a smile.

But fuck, I look like shit with my wind-whipped hair and bright red nose. I try to tuck away some of the loose strands of hair but somehow make it worse by having a static effect of hair-to-glove attraction.

Max pushes off the building, setting the pizzas down, and rushes over to me. He takes my face in his cold hands and rubs my cheek with his thumb.

"Are you alright?"

I nod with a slight snuffle. "Yeah. I am now."

His eyes light up, and his thumb trails to my bottom lip. "Let's get you inside."

I fumble with the keys in my gloved hand until frustration gives way, and I rip them off. He grabs the stack of pizzas. “What are those for? Are you a pizza delivery guy?”

I realize I have no idea what he does for work. Come to think of it, I don’t even know his last name. I should probably remedy that.

“Nah. I grabbed these on my way over but didn’t know what kind of toppings you liked, so I got a variety.”

The sweetness of the gesture isn’t lost on me. I’m pretty sure I just gave him the biggest heart eyes of my life. I fucking love pizza.

We enter the overly heated foyer, and I lead him up to my apartment past the peeling wallpaper and the eccentric first-floor neighbor whose cat décor has overtaken the landing. Her welcome mat reads, “A wild pussy lives here.” It makes me chuckle every time I see it.

I’m aware of his eyes on me. The intensity of his gaze is unmistakable.

I throw a quick look over my shoulder and confirm my suspicions. His eyes are directly on my ass. Smirking, I almost topple on the last step but catch myself before I go flying face first.

Once I see Max in my apartment, my fears ease. He looks at me like I’m an exquisite piece of art that belongs in a museum despite my insecurities.

“I can’t stay for long, Bella , but I had to make sure you were alright.”

Opening the first box of pizza, I snag one of the pieces with everything on it, inhaling the delicious cheesy scent. “I’m okay. And it turns out that I’m free this weekend.”

His dark eyes glitter with glee, and I wonder if, somehow, he already knew that.

“Be ready at 8 a.m. Dress warm.” He instructs.

The brat inside me wants to fight back, but he pulls his mask off and takes a bite of the pizza in my hands. “Hey!” I say, pulling my piece back to safety. “That’s mine. There are four boxes over there. Get your own.”

He swallows thickly, and I watch his prominent Adam’s apple bob. Why the fuck is that so hot?

“Yeah, but now, when you take a bite, it’ll be from a piece my mouth has touched.”

I flush as he steps closer to me, his hands finding my waist.

When Ned grabbed me earlier, I wanted to crawl out of my skin, but with Max, it feels right, like I belong in his arms.

I take a bite, and he watches me as my mouth closes around the cheesy goodness. My eyes flutter close as the flavors meld over my tastebuds. A small moan of appreciation escapes my throat.

His hands grip around my hips tighter, digging into my flesh. When I look up at him, his eyes flicker down to my lips as I swallow the bite down.

“Delicious,” I say with a small smile.

He dips down and takes my mouth with his. It’s urgent and demanding. I drop the piece I’m holding and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me.

I find myself pressed into the wall behind me, my hips meeting his. The unmistakable

bulge from his pants digs into me, and my eyes fly open at the impressive length. My fingers rake through the hair at the nape of his neck, deepening the kiss. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, and I'm bereft. There are too many layers of clothes between us.

A high-pitched ringtone comes from his back pocket, and he stills. Our breathing is labored as we stare at each other.

"Fuck. I have to?—"

"It's fine."

Regret lingers in his gaze before he peels himself off of me. I miss him immediately.

"Until tomorrow, Bella . Eight o'clock. Don't forget."

He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it, leaving the imprint of his lips on my tingling skin long after he's gone.

Fuck me. Tasha is right. I am in trouble.

The crooning sound of Lana Del Rey is blaring from my phone speaker as I apply a second layer of mascara to my eyelashes in an attempt to make them look longer than they are. The effect works wonders around my green eyes, making their color pop. I want to look my best for the date today. There's no mistaking it this time. It is definitely a date.

Blotting my lips with a cherry burgundy lipstick that matches my skirt, I replay that kiss from yesterday for the millionth time.

God, I can still feel his possessive hands on me. If we hadn't been interrupted, I'm

pretty sure I wouldn't have been able to stop. I didn't want it to stop.

I've always had a clear head when it comes to dating. But this? My emotions muddle my every thought when I'm around him.

Once my hair is set in loose waves that cascade over my shoulders and down my back, I spritz my favorite signature scent that I reserve for special occasions. Warm amber with a hint of vanilla mixed with caramel.

I take one last look in the mirror, spinning around to get the full 360 effect. I didn't know what to expect, so I dressed in layers. My tights cling to my legs, and my skirt gives it a flirty edge, while my cream-colored sweater offers some much-needed warmth, just in case he takes me somewhere outdoors. I opted for a simple brown pair of flats that never let me down. Heels in this city are a twisted ankle waiting to happen. He's tall enough that I can pull off wearing them, but I don't fancy an injury enough to risk it. The last time I wore heels, I ended up hobbling around like an injured baby bird for a week after.

Text me all the dirty updates.

Tasha messages, and I smile. She'd been kicking her feet in gleeful giddy when I told her about the pizzas, especially when I recruited her to help me get rid of the excess. I love pizza, but the thought of eating it for the next week made me queasy. Thankfully, she works with a host of dude-bros at her sports marketing firm who can demolish a pizza in one sitting.

You got it.

I message back. With my schedule clear for the next week, we made plans to meet up for lunch on Monday. The abrupt change in Ned's decision eats at me, though. He was so adamant about his decision to fire me, and with my not-so-professional exit, I

never thought I would hear from him again. While I'm thankful to still have that source of income, I can't help but wonder what changed his mind. I reason that maybe he was afraid of getting sued for sexual harassment for the way he came onto me.

Right as the clock hits eight, the buzzer to my apartment rings, and my stomach dips low in response.

"Come on up," I say through the static-sounding intercom. A crackle of disjointed words answers me in response, though I have no clue what he just said back to me. It's been broken for months, and the landlord isn't about to fix it anytime soon. I learned early on that he can only be bothered in extreme emergencies, and even then, you're better off handling it yourself.

When Max arrives at my door, I see the entirety of his face.

"No mask today?" Those butterflies are back in full force when he hits me with the most blinding smile.

"Just for now." He responds, piquing my curiosity. There's still so much I don't know about him that I hope to uncover on our date today, like his last name.

For all I know, it could be Gulia, like in *The Wedding Singer*. I could be looking at a future doomed to be called Julia Gulia.

What is wrong with me thinking about marriage already? I mentally shake myself to calm my tits.

"You look stunning." He says, kissing me on the cheek, and my stupid heart swoons as an image of me in an ethereal-looking wedding dress slams into my brain. He unveils one long-stemmed red rose from behind his back, and I clutch it to my chest.

Goddammit.

He's even taken care to file off all the thorns.

I'm not usually such a romantic, but nothing about how I feel about Max feels like anything I'm used to.

"Thank you," I squeak out. "So, where are you taking me?"

"Now that, Bella, is a surprise."

CHAPTER 10

Maximo

LAST NIGHT

My heart was hammering in my chest by the time I got back to the abandoned warehouse, with the scent of Julia all over me. I'm in so much fucking trouble it's disturbing. But I can't seem to stay away from her. This isn't me. I don't date, and I especially don't drag men over counters and spend fifty bucks on pizza for a woman I barely know.

But fuck it, right?

Rocco sniffs me. "Well, you don't smell like pussy. She turn you down for a game of 'just the tip?' or..."

Turn me down? Never. I felt the way she reacted to my touch, how her skin ignited with goosebumps, and the action of her body shivering against me the moment I pushed her against the wall of her apartment. Those fucking lips of hers. The whole drive back, all I could think about was the way they would look wrapped around my cock. Her big, rounded eyes, drool seeping at the corners of her mouth.

Julia is innocent, no doubt about that, but her mouth...is all kinds of sin. Dio mio , now I'm thinking about her naked on the bed, begging for me to?—

Fingers click in front of my face. "You've got it bad. I've never seen you like this

over a woman.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His thick eyebrow raises in my direction, calling bullshit on the entire thing. “Sure, Jan.” And that Brady Bunch quote is exactly what I mean. “How’d you meet her?”

I briefly close my eyes, knowing the moment I answer, he’s going to be asking questions left and right. Clearing my throat, I give him one short answer. “Coffee shop. So now you have your answer. Let’s finish this and get it over with.”

Unzipping the black duffel bag, I lift the Glock from inside and attach the silencer to the end. As I continue to twist it, my cousin persists.

“She hot?”

Silence.

“You kissed her yet?”

More silence from me. I’m not entertaining this.

“Fucked her? With a name like Julia, I bet she sucks a mean?—”

“Finish that sentence, cugino , and I’ll shoot you instead of him. My words come out tense, frustrated, and it’s another thing I have to be irritated about because all I seem to want to do is keep her safe from all this shit. Except the only problem is even being near her is putting her in danger. But I’m far too selfish to give her up. She’ll hate me in the end when she finds out. She’ll scream, cry, call the police, and then her name will be all over the news.

Lifting the camera from the bag, I shove it into Rocco's chest, "Just record the fucking thing, alright."

"Touchy, touchy." He smirks deviously.

I roll my eyes and make my way over to John, who has now been missing for nearly a week. "Did you miss me, sweetheart?" I ask, raising the gun in my hand, pointing it directly at his head.

"Wait, wait, wait...whatever you want...you can have it. Money, my home...fuck anything!" He flinches, tightly squeezing his eyes shut.

I snicker in response, "Yeah, I'm well aware of that." I gaze at Rocco, who gives me a thumbs up. The reason we are recording this is so when it's played, everyone will see and know what a fucking scumbag he is. "Now, my cousin here is recording everything that happens from here on out. We're not going to give you a note or a list of things for you to say. But what you are going to do is tell the people what a fucking disgusting human being you are. Starting now."

"Please just...I just want to go home." He blubbers.

"John, I will shoot you in the fucking leg if you don't open your fucking mouth and START TALKING!" I take a deep breath, calming myself. "Say it, and I'll let you go." I lie. "Tell them, and you can go back home to your cheating wife and your unhappy marriage."

"Alright...I...fuck," he hisses. "My name is John Richardson, and I have something to confess. I'm not a good person. I'm the worst there is. I created a program that would filter the most heinous medical diseases through the insurance systems of Copperfield Vitality, denying them help. Then...then I had the system decipher those who were?—"

“Come on! Keep going. Tell the world what you did, John.”

“Those who were...not...worth saving. The patients who were on death’s door. It saved the company millions, bringing in more revenue than we ever expected.”

This prick almost sounds proud of what he did.

“It would also hand select specific medications on a weekly basis and remove them from being included in the health insurance, turning them into a payable medication that many couldn’t afford.”

The tears streaming down his face won’t save him now. He’s petrified, and so he fucking should be. The world will be a better place without someone like him, someone who steals and rids families of loved ones. Nothing, not even money, is worth all the suffering and loss he’s caused. I imagine all the people who have suffered, watching someone they love weaken, to have to sit there and worry about how they’re going to afford it, working multiple jobs just so they have even a few moments longer.

I think about how my own mother lost herself for months after my father left this world.

“I didn’t care.” He continues. “All I wanted was money, to have all the things I wanted, and nothing else mattered. I was power-hungry, and I stopped caring about the lives of others. There!” He cries out. “Now let me fuck?—”

The bullet from my gun flies from the chamber, piercing through the air in slow motion. I’m only aware that it hit the intended target by the warmth of the blood as it splatters my face in tiny droplets. Brain matter and cracked skull now litter the ground behind him as it traveled through and through.

John's head drops backward, eyes wide and staring at the ceiling. My hand gripping so tightly around the gun that my knuckles are a stark shade of white. And the shiver that runs through me shoots from the base of my spine to the top of my head, causing the follicles of my curly black hair to stand on end.

"That was for everyone you hurt."

Lowering the gun, Rocco takes a step toward me and places a hand on my shoulder. "Get out of here. I'll make a call to my friend, and we'll take care of the rest."

I turn to face him, the burning sting behind the back of my eye sockets threatening its way through as I think of my father and his final moments of suffering, what it put him and my family through, and all the regret of killing a man in cold blood leaves my body in a flash.

Rocco cups the back of my head, bringing his forehead to meet mine. "For Gio, for the people."

"For the people...and my father."

CURRENT MOMENT

Fuck, she looks even more beautiful than she has the last few times I've seen her. Last night was the first time I'd slept well in a while, but today, I woke up with more excitement than expected after everything that happened.

"Where's your bag?" I question.

"My bag?" Julia frowns in confusion.

"My special place isn't anywhere near here. It's a four-hour drive, and honestly, you

won't want to leave once you see it. So, I'll wait. Go pack enough for a few days."

"Oh, I thought this was just a day date?" Her eyes widen slightly at the unbridled thought seeping from her lips. "Well...I mean not a date exactly, I just..."

She's babbling again. And fuck me, it's cute.

"I didn't mean to assume it was a date if that's what you're thinking, I just kind of?—"

Cupping her rose-colored cheeks with both my hands, I step closer to her, pressing a gentle kiss to the tip of her nose. She really needs to calm down. This girl doesn't have a clue how to ask for what she wants, embarrassed by her own honesty, but I'll change that within the next few days.

"Bella," I croon almost in a whisper. "It's a date, trust me." She seems to relax into me more with that confirmation. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." She answers so quickly that it shows me she didn't even need to think about it.

"Then go pack a bag for a few days. I promise you're safe with me."

"O-okay." She smiles brightly.

Letting her go, I watch her walk into her bedroom with an extra skip in her step, and I can't help but smile. I only have a few days left in America—I know that much. And there isn't a single part of me that plans to waste them without her by my side. I'll make sure that when I leave, nothing can be traced back to her.

CHAPTER 11

Julia

I pack for every contingency and bring way too much underwear. There's something hardwired into my brain that is convinced I might need seven pairs over the course of a few days. Before I go, I make sure my location is being shared with Tasha, just in case.

Max doesn't look like a killer, but you never know. I'd hate to end up on one of those documentaries.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you heard that right. Julia Canon met her demise by being lured into the forest by a handsome man, all for the chance to ride his dick.

The car he brings me to is a sleek black SUV with tinted windows.

"You're not going to kidnap me, are you?" I joke as he throws my bag in the trunk.

He smiles, "Why are you a CEO?"

I bust out laughing at his unexpected joke.

Once we're settled in the car, he has me hook up my phone to the speakers, allowing me to play whatever songs I desire.

I pick something neutral while he maneuvers the large vehicle out of the traffic-

clogged streets. It isn't long until we're out on an open stretch of road, headed north and enveloped by the bountiful trees Upstate New York has to offer.

"Let me guess, your special place is in Sleepy Hollow. You have a thing for the Headless Horseman."

"Nope." He pops the sound of the 'p' while grabbing my hand.

His long fingers wrap around my small ones, fitting perfectly together. As he drives, he pulls my hand onto his knee, palm face down, while he rubs my skin ever so gently.

"Well, how about this, you tell me something about yourself. Maybe like your last name or what you do for a living. It's only fair since you know where I work."

He casts a quick sidelong glance at me. "Well, my full name is Maximo Lorenzo Rossi"

"That's quite a mouthful."

"Oh, Bella, you have no idea what a mouthful is." I flush with heat.

"And your job?"

"Currently, I'm taking some time off from the family business. My mom's not doing well since my father passed." His jaw tightens, and he lets go of my hand to grip the steering wheel.

I place my hand in my lap and watch him, knowing all too well that sickening feeling of loss that sucker punches you right in the gut.

He goes on a tirade of American Healthcare. “These people, they play with our lives without a second thought.”

“I completely agree.”

He turns again. The surprise is evident on his face.

“When my mom was diagnosed with MS, we saw a million specialists. To even get the diagnosis took years. And by the time we had one, we’d racked up thousands of dollars in debt. I spent countless hours on hold, waiting for someone to explain why things we were told would be covered were suddenly being denied.” His hand finds its way to my thigh, and he squeezes. It’s a comforting gesture, but more than that, it’s one of understanding.

Unshed tears blur my vision, remembering the devastation of having to fight with the insurance company just so my mom could get care. “Without her medication, she went downhill fast. The one they gave her as a substitute poisoned her liver and kidneys. She went into multiple organ failure, and the next thing I knew...she was gone.” A stray tear spills down my cheek. “Sorry.”

“Julia, you never need to apologize to me for your tears. You loved your mother, and she was lucky to have you as a daughter.” I snifle and wipe away the tears.

“It’s baffling how we can live in such an advanced society. Modern medicine is the best it’s ever been, yet these companies and these people stand in the way, determining who gets what care. It’s inhumane.”

“Do you think they’ll find the missing CEO?”

His grip tightens around the steering wheel. “Who knows. But if they do, I hope whoever took him made a difference.”

Several hours later, we arrive at a cabin nestled comfortably in a forest of pine trees. Lake Gardini is only a short walk away, and a pier leads up to the house. It's frozen over, and I can only imagine what this place must look like in the summer. The tips of the trees are blanketed in snow, glittering in the bright winter sun. I look down at my shoes and realize, with all my preparation, that I am not equipped to go trouncing about in a foot of snow.

"Wait there," Max commands, rushing around the car to open my door.

"What are you doing?" I ask, unbuckling my seatbelt with a giggle. He looks almost boyish as he grips me about the waist. Before I know what's happening, I'm hoisted over his broad shoulders like a sack of potatoes.

"I can't have you slipping and falling. You're a liability in those shoes."

"Well, at least the view is good from here," I remark, seeing nothing but his ass from this vantage point. His hands grip me tightly around the backs of my thighs, and I marvel at his strength. I'm not a small girl. I'm tall and curvy. For him to be able to lift me with such ease impresses the hell out of me.

He places me down gently like I'm made of porcelain before opening the cabin door for us. It's stuffy and clearly hasn't been used in some time, but it's gorgeous. The lights flicker to life, and I wander further inside, taking in the rustic décor and high vaulted ceiling. Hanging from the middle of a beam is a chandelier made out of antlers. In fact, there are antlers everywhere.

"Does Gaston own this place?" I ask, wondering about the clear overuse of antlers in the decorating.

"No, it belonged to my father and his father before him."

“So, now it’s yours?”

Max gives a quick nod and goes back out to the car, bringing in both our bags.

I check my phone and notice the lack of reception. At least my location is still working, though, because Tasha will go postal if anything happens to me. That girl would bring hell with her to find me if I ever went missing.

We sit cross-legged in front of the fire, eating the tacos Max brought. Salsa drips down my chin, and he chuckles at me, leaning over to wipe the excess from my skin.

I feel so at ease with him, like I’ve known him my whole life and not a few short weeks. My mother always said that when I met the right person that I would just know. I never understood that until now.

It feels wild to think that way when we haven’t even slept together yet, but it’s how I feel.

“Did you come up here a lot as a kid?” I ask, taking another bite.

“We practically lived here in the summer. My cousins, aunts, and uncles would all come over while we spent the days swimming or fishing. At night, we’d sit around the campfire, making s’mores and telling ghost stories. My dad was always the best at it, getting us kids so scared that we couldn’t sleep a wink. I think the other parents secretly hated when he would tell us those stories because then they had to deal with us all night.”

I smile at the picture he paints. “That sounds amazing.” I don’t miss the wistful way he talks, remembering a world that his father is no longer a part of.

“It feels weird being back, though. I haven’t been here since before he passed. And

the house has never been this quiet.” He looks far away, lost in time and memory.

“Well, we’ll just have to fix that then.”

“Oh yeah? You want to show me how loud you can be?” He asks, a devious expression coating his face.

“Try me.” My voice sounds husky, and my core instantly heats as he stares at me, dark eyes flicking to my lips.

His mouth is on me in a second, tacos completely forgotten. All I can think of is this man in front of me and how he makes me feel so alive.

“Show me your bedroom,” I say, nearly breathless.

“Your wish is my command.” He answers, yanking me up. I follow his lead, savoring the way his hands don’t leave my body, needing more of those head-spinning kisses only he can give.

CHAPTER 12

Maximo

My hands find the backs of her thighs, and I lift her effortlessly into my arms. Julia's legs wrap tightly around my waist, and her arms snake around the back of my neck. She's holding me, devouring my mouth like I'm her last meal. As I carry her up the winding staircase toward my bedroom, her warm body feels like a fire that warms the ice of my perpetually cold heart.

I'm swallowing every single one of her delicate moans like they're the air I need to breathe. Kicking the wooden door of my room open, I press her back to the wall, sandwiching her between me and the wood paneling. Lowering her feet to the floor, I move my lips from hers and down the column of her neck.

"Beautiful." I breathe against her skin. Trailing my hand down along the outline of her curves. These tights need to go. "Are you attached to these tights?" I question as I glide my fingers up her inner thighs in search of what I'm sure is a perfect fucking pussy.

"Not at all." She whimpers.

"Good."

Without wasting a second longer, I grip the sheer fabric between my fingertips and rip them open. The loud tearing of nylon echoes within the room, and she jolts in surprise at my action. I can already feel the heat permeating from her core, her sweet,

needy sounds telling me just how much she wants this.

I nip the skin on her shoulder, the pads of my fingers running along the silk of her thong. “Christ.” I groan. “Can I touch you?” I ask, but all she does is nod furiously at my question. Standing to my full height, I look down at her flushed appearance and grin, curling my index and middle finger inside the thin material. Careful not to touch her most intimate part.

“Words, Bella , I want to hear you say it. Beg me for it.”

“Max, please...”

I pull the fabric to the side, pulling her hips forward with my free hand and bunching her skirt to the middle of her waist so I’m able to look between us.

“Please, what, Julia?”

“Touch me, make me come.”

With those words spoken, I slide my fingers along the inside of the fabric towards her core, teasing her, being careful not to touch her. I want this to last. From what I can see, she’s soaked. And as much as I’m desperate to fuck her, I need her pleasure to come first.

“Max, please.” Julia mewls.

“As you wish.”

My fingers meet her slick heat, sliding between her lips, and she jolts at the contact, biting down on her lower lip so hard she might draw blood. I glide my fingers up the expansion of her slit, collecting her juices on my fingers as I go, and I release a thick

groan.

“Fuck, Julia, you’re soaked.”

She nods profusely, her eyes blown with lust. “For you.” She whispers, and the sound of those words drives me insane.

Pressing against her clit I begin circling the tips of my fingers slowly, with only a slight amount of pressure. I want to watch her come undone in my hands, slowly and without restraint. My free hand collars her throat, not too tight to choke her, but with enough force to keep her in place.

All my focus is on her, the expressions of enjoyment she makes, the soft moans of desire, and how each labored breath she takes pushes her round breasts closer to my chest.

“Oh my God,” she cries the moment I switch up the intensity of my pace.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to hers, thrusting my tongue into her mouth, claiming her as mine.

“Put your fingers inside me...please, Max.”

“Fuuuck.” I huff before giving her what she desires. I’m rock fucking solid, my cock straining behind the zipper of my jeans. And with not an ounce of fucking friction against it, I’m growing more impatient as the seconds pass. Gliding my fingers from her clit to her hole, I change fingers, swirling both middle fingers around her core before thrusting them inside her on a slight curve.

“Yes,” her body starts shuddering, her jaw goes slack, and her hot breath dances along my jaw. “Right there.” She grinds her hips against my hand, and I grin against

her mouth.

“That’s it, Julia, fuck yourself on my hand. Show me how sweet you look when you come.”

I remove my hand from her throat, lowering myself to my knees, and without giving her a moment to protest—not that she would—I wrap my lips around her clit and suck. Her cry of pleasure is everything I knew it would be, sensual and pitched high enough that she sounds like a fucking porn star.

The taste of her pussy is fucking heaven, I knew it would be. There was no doubt in my mind that a woman this stunning would have a cunt I could die eating. Bringing the tip of my tongue to the front of my lips, I flick it up and down against her throbbing bundle of nerves, curving my fingers up against her G-spot as I finger fuck her into oblivion.

I pull my mouth from her clit and press the palm of my hand against her lower stomach. My thumb returns to her clit for added pressure. “You’re going to come for me, Bella, like the good girl I know you are.”

“Oh my God, what...fuck.”

Christ, when she swears, it does something to me.

“You feel that pressure, baby.” I groan, “I want you to bare down and squirt for me.”

“Wha-what.” She stutters, her hooded eyes finding mine. “I can’t...I’ve never done?—”

I chuckle softly. “Well, you’re going to right now.”

My fingers speed up, fucking her fast and deep, her screams of ecstasy sailing into my ears, and I can already feel the pre-cum seeping from my cock and soaking the cotton fabric of my boxers.

“Holy...fuck, shit, ohmyfuckinggod! ” She screams.

Within a few seconds, she comes, gushing her release so violently it soaks the cuff of my sleeve.

“Such a good fucking girl.” I croon, continuing to fuck her through the intense orgasm she’s having. Her core squeezes my fingers, cutting off all circulation as she rides the intense wave.

Her hands and fingers fist her skirt in reaction to the intense feeling. When she’s done, I focus on the heavy sounds of her breathing as I stand, and I’m ready to come myself. When her eyes open, I lift my hand to my mouth, sucking her cum from every finger. She’s the most amazing taste I’ve ever had on my tongue.

Julia’s hands shake against the button on my jeans, both of us working to free my aching cock from its confinement. When she yanks the zipper down, she wastes no time reaching inside my boxers and wrapping her hand around my shaft. I hiss at the contact of her cold hand, her eyes widening in shock.

“Wait, are you pierced?”

“Yes.” I answer quickly, “And when I slide my cock into your tight cunt, you’re going to count each one for me.”

She lifts my cock out, my own hands lowering the denim just below my ass, and she looks down between us. I have eight piercings. A Jacob’s ladder and a piercing an inch above the base of my cock. One she will find out the use for soon enough.

“Turn around, face the wall, baby.” She wastes no time following my order. “Don’t worry, I plan on fucking you in my bed too, but right now, I need to be inside you.”

I grip the base and run the length of my shaft through her lips, coating the skin in her thick, silky arousal. And fucking hell does she feel good. Both of us are still completely dressed, another thing I will remedy after she comes on my cock.

Shit, condom.

“Fuck,” I groan in frustration.

“What?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don’t have any condoms. This isn’t exactly what I expected to happen,” I chuckle dryly.

“Oh, uh...I have the implant. I’m um...” She turns her head to the side, looking at me, and there goes that blush displayed on the apples of her cheeks. “I haven’t been with anyone for a while, and I’m...I’m clean.”

“So am I.” I retort, fisting her wavy blond hair in my hands and pulling her head back. “Are you telling me I can fuck you bare?”

“Max—”

“Use your words, Julia. Tell me exactly what you want.”

“Yes, fuck me, just...please...I don’t fucking care, just...I need you.”

I smirk, baring my teeth to her and bringing my lips to the shell of her ear. Lifting the crown of my dick to her entrance, I growl. “Count for me, Bella.”

The head of my cock breaches her opening, both of us moaning in unison. I remove my hand from the base, placing it on her lower back and pushing her down into a more comfortable position. She arches back as I step back, bending over with her cheek still pressed against the wall.

Lifting my hand, I crack my palm against her ass cheek, and she clenches, crying out against the sting.

“So responsive, Julia.” I thrust my first piercing inside her, and her response was everything I hoped for.

“Fuck!”

“How many, Julia?”

“One.”

I thrust further in.

“Two...shit!”

Lowering my eyes, I watch my shaft disappear inch by inch inside her warm pussy, and it’s like heaven. She continues to count every one of them until I’m balls deep inside her—the piercing on the underside rubbing against that sweet spot of hers. My forehead drops to her shoulder as I pull out nice and slowly before slamming back inside her.

“Dio mio, you feel fucking incredible.” I breathe. Performing the same action again. Slowly pulling out and a deep, aggressive thrust back in. “Your tight little cunt is taking every inch of me so fucking well.”

“Oh God.”

“No God here, baby, so you’ll call out my name when you moan...do you understand?”

I stand straight, one hand still in her thick tresses and the other gripping her hip, pulling her towards me with every thrust.

“Max.” she cries.

“That’s my girl.”

Without wasting another moment, I look between us and begin fucking her with unparalleled aggression.

CHAPTER 13

Julia

I'm in heaven. Never have I been so thoroughly fucked in all my life, and I haven't even come on his cock yet. The ladder of piercings he has rubs inside of me. Feeling the cool metal barbs penetrate me over and over again with no restraint as my back arches, hands on the wall for support, I think this is it. This is how I die. Fucked into oblivion.

Eight. He has eight motherfucking Jacob's Ladder piercings, all rubbing me in the most tantalizing way, heightening my pleasure with every thrust.

My scalp tingles with him pulling my hair, but it only makes me arch my back more, allowing him to thrust his thick length in deeper.

My ripped tights cling to my legs, and my skirt rides up my back, but I can only focus on Max. He sets a punishing pace, balls slapping against my pussy with each thrust. His lowest barbell rubs my clit in just the right way. I'm practically crawling out of my skin, wanting more, no, needing more.

A sharp slap on my ass pulls a yelp from my lips. It stings but feels so good at the same time.

"You'll take what I give you and like it, Bella. "

"F-fuck."

“Tell me how much you like it. I want to hear it.”

“I fucking love it.”

“I’ve been dreaming of feeling you like this since I saw you in that coffee shop. So sweet and innocent. Begging to be corrupted. And the way you said my name, I knew I needed to make you scream it for me.”

His hand that was holding my hair snakes around my throat, pressing my face into the wall as he slams into me from behind.

“Open that pretty little throat for me and scream my name, Bella. ”

“Max!” I cry out, feeling the embers of my orgasm build deep in my core as his pace picks up. His thrusts are deep and fast. I can barely hold myself up. I’m completely at his mercy.

The hand around my throat tightens, making me gasp for air. Tiny black spots dot my vision, and my head swims as my orgasm slams into me, overtaking my entire body.

“That’s it, baby, soak my cock with your cum.”

Another wave of pleasure racks my body as his dick twitches inside me. He’s close.

He grunts loudly as he explodes inside of me, filling me up with his hot cum.

I slide down the wall, hardly able to keep myself standing. My legs are sore, and my back is aching. Max grips me about the waist, turning me in his arms and kissing me soundly.

“That was fucking amazing.” He says, forehead pressed to mine. “Let’s get you

cleaned up.”

I follow him on wobbly legs into the bathroom, letting him dote on me.

Max is attentive, making sure I’m well taken care of. He wipes me with a warm washcloth after peeling my clothes from my body. I feel vulnerable standing here in front of him without a stitch of clothing on. That smirk of his hasn’t left his face, though, as he takes in every inch of my body.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” He says, placing a kiss on my bare shoulder.

I blush. “You’re not so bad to look at yourself,” I say, trailing my finger down his incredibly well-defined chest, stopping at that perfect V that sits along his hip bones.

“But I have to say this might be my favorite bit,” I say, grabbing his half-hard cock. It surges in my hands.

“Fuck.” He throws his head back as I sink to my knees in front of him.

I look up at him through my lashes as his hand fists my hair.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Bella. ”

I feel one of the barbells with my thumb, watching his cock twitch at the touch. “Are these sensitive?”

He grunts. “Yeah. They’re there to heighten your pleasure, but it adds to mine as well.”

“Hmm,” I say, licking the base of him, feeling the piercings against my tongue.

The taste of us both lingers on his erect length. There's no way I can fit him in my mouth, but I manage to take his tip halfway down. His hand twists in my hair, pulling me as far as I can go. My eyes leak as I struggle against the intrusion.

"Relax your throat," he instructs, and I do as I'm told. "That's it. Fuck, you're taking me so well. Look at you on your knees for me."

I feel like I'm glowing from the inside out from hearing him praise me. While his words are full of admiration, his movements are demanding. He grants me no mercy as he fucks my mouth. Spit slides down my chin, and still, I take all he has to give me.

His length hits the back of my throat, and his body shudders as my hand works the rest of his cock. He's too big to fit all the way into my mouth. Finally, he lets up and releases me. I take a welcome breath into my lungs before trailing my tongue around his prominent pulsating vein, licking the barbells on the way up until I'm swirling around his leaking tip.

"That's it. I need to be in you again." He says, yanking me to my feet.

He hoists me into his arms and wraps my legs around him, carrying me to the bed. Our mouths find each other. My lips are swollen with the taste of us on my tongue.

My body is thrown onto the bed, but the blankets cushion my fall.

Max grips his cock, pumping it in his hand as he looks at me laid out for him. I bite on my bottom lip, seeing the promise of what he's about to do to me in his dark eyes.

Knees dipping on the bed, he spreads my legs wide for him.

"You look so perfect, spread beneath me like this. So needy for my cock."

His hands trail up my legs, heating my skin and sending tingles of desire up my spine. I'm still sensitive from just being fucked up against the wall, but I want more. I've never been so desperate before. Usually, the guys I've been with were all about a quick fuck that got them off and had me fumbling for one of my toys to finish the job.

But not Max.

Being with him is a whole new experience. One that I want to repeat over and over.

“Dio mio.” He nips at my inner thigh. “I think I may never want to leave this bed.” His mouth trails up, hot breath tickling my bare skin. Every place he touches me sends my nerves firing. It's like having my own personal fireworks show going off inside my body, all because of him.

His mouth finds my pussy, and he gives it one strong lick before swirling his tongue around my sensitive clit. “Mmm. You taste like us.”

He climbs up my body until his cock is prodding against my opening. I arch my hips up to meet him, urging him on and feeling impatient. He enters me in one swift motion, hitting so deep I swear his tip touches my cervix. I cry out in pleasure, feeling warm all over. Stars dot my vision as he pushes inside me.

We move together in a synchronized dance, his eyes on mine as if he can see right into my soul. The way he looks at me rattles something in my chest. This thing between us feels like a bomb waiting to explode. It's fragile and new but intense.

His thumb trails my jawline before he grips my chin and brings my lips to his. He kisses me hard, tongues tangling in a fit of desperation as our hips grind together. Seeking our mutual pleasure. This time, he takes his time with me. While he's still demanding, it's gentler and more intentional—like he wants to savor every second and commit it to memory. Breaking our kiss, he stares down at me like I'm the most

precious thing he's ever held in his life. My brows pinch together, not knowing what to do with all these emotions floating through me.

"Give me your legs." He says, gripping onto them and hauling them both over his shoulder. The change in position has him getting impossibly deeper. My eyes roll back into my head as his pelvis rubs against my clit with each thrust.

"Eyes on me, Bella ." He demands, smacking the back of my thigh hard enough that it has my eyes flying open, seeing him watching me so intently. His dark hair is a mess, falling over his forehead, mouth slightly open. Unable to take my eyes off of his body, I watch as his abs contract as he fucks me harder. His pace picks up, eyes trailing down the length of my body.

"I love seeing these tits of yours bounce for me."

Raising my eyebrows, I trail my fingers over my perky nipples, pinching and tugging on them. His pupils eat up the space in his dark eyes, making him look more like a predator as he watches me. I roll my nipples, and he thrusts harder and faster. My whole body is being slammed into the bed. He has me practically folded in half, taking him so deep that I think I might scream from the building pressure. He's so big that it stings, but also it feels so fucking amazing.

My head swims, and the edges of my vision begin to go spotty as my orgasm slams into me so hard that I cry out. I feel like I'm about to pass out from how amazing I feel.

His hips jerk wildly, and I can tell he's close.

His mouth finds mine, and he twists my nipple in between his fingers. I yelp and feel another wave of pleasure erupt.

“Fucking hell!” Max yells out as he comes.

He finishes inside me and slides my legs down his body. They feel non-existent like they’re no longer attached to my body. It takes me a few minutes to get my bearings.

Rolling off me, he gathers me against him and tucks me against his bare chest. I can feel his heart begin to beat in a steady rhythm as he runs his hand absentmindedly down my tangled blonde hair.

If I wasn’t in trouble with losing my heart to this man before, I most definitely am now.

CHAPTER 14

Maximo

After however long it took for us to stop clawing at each other, it was only when the sun began to set, and the sky started turning pink that she passed out from exhaustion. My intention wasn't to bring her here and fuck her. In fact, I'm not actually sure why I brought her here. My father's cabin isn't exactly a place I choose to bring a person I only just met. But after she took me somewhere that meant so much to her, I couldn't stop myself from arranging this.

Since she's been sleeping, all I've done is stare at her. Watching the rise and fall of her back as she lay on her front, her head turned towards me. Her blonde hair splayed over the pillow, and the white bedsheet covering only her ass as she peacefully dreams.

It's been so long since I've felt a connection like this with anyone, and honestly, it scares the living shit out of me because I know that if the police ever finds out what I've done, whatever this is between us, can go no further. Who would want to be with a cold-blooded killer like me? My cell phone vibrates against the wood of the bedside table. Her body stirs slightly, and I answer it.

Carefully getting out of bed, I grab some gray sweats from the drawer, pressing the phone between my jaw and shoulder while putting them on. "What?" I murmur, careful not to wake Julia.

"I figured I'd give you a call and see how you're holding up," Rocco says.

I step out of the bedroom and close the door behind me. “I’m good, why?” I whisper further.

“Well, you did just...wait,” he pauses briefly. “Why are you whispering?”

“No reason.” It’s not like I’m going to give him a full breakdown of the fact that Julia is sleeping after fucking my brains out.

He laughs down the phone, “You’re with her, aren’t you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Does she know?”

“No,” I roll my eyes as though he can see me. “You think I’m going to tell the girl I’m fucking that I’m the CEO killer. Don’t be so fucking stupid, cugino .”

Sighing down the phone, I can already hear the smirk on his stupid fucking face as I descend the stairs and make my way toward the kitchen. “I don’t know, man, pussy will make you do some crazy shit when it’s good.”

And fuck me, is it.

The way her body responded so perfectly to mine, her moans of ecstasy every single time I touched her body, even down to the way my name sounded as she cried out with each and every orgasm I gave her. Fuck. This isn’t good, I’ve already become addicted to this woman, and I have no fucking idea what to do about it.

She came out of nowhere, and before I knew it, she was all I could think about. Turning on the coffee machine, I grab a mug from the cupboards and add three spoonfuls of sugar and powdered milk. “In answer to your question, I’m fine. I’m just

glad everything is over. You took care to leave the body where someone would find it, right?"

"Yes."

"And the recording?" I ask, watching the coffee heat up in the glass pot. I try to rid my thoughts of the beauty sleeping upstairs.

"Emailed to the to the New York Informer Newspaper from an untraceable IP address. We should see it on our screens within the next few hours or more, depending on how long it takes those assholes to check their emails."

"Good."

"So, where are you exactly?"

"Dad's cabin." I clear my throat, waiting for him to say something completely out of turn. He knows what this place means to me, and bringing her here may have been a terrible mistake, but once the idea popped into my head, I couldn't stop myself.

Rocco lets out a whistle down the line, saying nothing in response.

"What?"

"Nothing, I'm just...are you in love with this girl?" The question is so matter-of-fact that it completely catches me off guard.

"Rocco, what the fuck kind of question is that?"

There's no way that I can love someone after only being around them a handful of times, shit. Even if I did, I wouldn't exactly know either. I've never been in love with

a woman in my life, and besides, the notion is ridiculous on its own.

“It’s one that’s easy enough to answer, so...are you?”

I curl my fingers around the black handle of the glass coffee jug and begin pouring it into the mug. “I’m not even answering that.”

“No answer is an answer in itself, cugino . My suggestion is you drop this shit before it gets any more complicated. What do you think will happen when she finds out you’re the man the whole of the New York Police Department is looking for? You made a mistake getting involved with her. You’re flying back to Sicily in a few days. How do you think she’s going to feel?”

“I know, alright,” I whisper shout. “Nobody will know it was me unless you snitch on me, which I know you won’t. So, trust me when I say I’ll take care of it.”

“You better, Max. End it before it becomes even more complicated than it already is.”

The silence on the line is palpable, neither one of us saying a word for a beat. I know everything he said is right. I need to break this off before her feelings get involved, or worse, my own. I’m just not ready to give up a single part of her yet.

“Look, I have to go. Are you staying there until your flight?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll pick you up in a couple of days.”

“I need to return the rental.”

“Shit, alright, I’ll bring a friend and have him take it back.”

“Alright. Speak soon.”

Fuck.

CHAPTER 15

Julia

I wake in total darkness and turn to find Max's side of the bed empty. Bleary-eyed and sore, I stretch out, feeling completely sated. I don't think I've ever orgasmed so much in my life.

Max's muffled voice carries up into the lofted ceiling, and I smile, remembering all the ways he fucked me. I grab his tossed shirt from the floor and shrug it onto my body. It hits me right in the middle of my ass, doing very little to cover me up. I smirk thinking of what Max will do seeing me like this.

My hair is a total disaster. Tangled and giving the 'I've just been fucked' look. I'll have to dig out my brush from my bag downstairs.

As I reach the stairs, Max's voice becomes clearer. He's on the phone and rummaging around in the kitchen. I sneak down, planning to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his strong back, when I hear something that stops me dead in my tracks.

"Nobody will know it was me unless you snitch on me, which I know you won't. So, trust me when I say I'll take care of it." He says into the phone with such force it has me scrambling back up the steps.

My heart hammers loudly all the way up as my thoughts swirl in my head. What the hell did he mean by no one will know it was me? What won't they know?

Suddenly, being alone in the woods with a guy I barely know is feeling like a fucking stupid decision. I find my phone on the bedroom floor, halfway thrown under the bed.

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Fuck. I hurriedly check to see if my location is still being shared, but it's clear there's no signal.

What if he's planning to murder me, and this is his murder cabin in the woods? He tells girls a sad, sappy story, making them think he's a good guy, and then, BAM!

I hope they don't use my most recent photo I posted of myself for the missing person's photo.

My screen flickers as I type out a message to Tasha.

No, no, no! Goddammit. It's dead.

The door swings wide open, and I nearly jump out of my skin. Clutching my hand to my erratically beating chest, I tell myself to act fucking normal. I don't need him to know that I overheard him.

Max chuckles darkly, and I see his large silhouette filling up the space in the door frame. "Sorry, Bella, I didn't mean to scare you." He comes closer, handing me a steaming cup of coffee.

"I didn't know how you like it, so I added some creamer and sugar."

"Thanks," My voice squeaks out, sniffing the almond-scented beverage. What was that one murder documentary that Tasha and I watched awhile back where it said that people use almonds to mask the smell or taste of arsenic? Oh God, what if he's

poisoning me? Death by caffeine. What an ironic way to go for a barista.

“Are you alright? You seem...far away in your thoughts.”

I wave my hand and set the untouched coffee on the nightstand. “Totally. I’m just tired.” I let out a nervous-sounding laugh.

He sits next to me, sipping on his drink.

“It’s alright, you can tell me. I know that this has all been fast. We should probably talk about what this all means.”

I nod my head, eyes wide, looking for a way to escape the room if I need to. “Okay.”

“My life is a bit complicated, and I don’t know how far this can go with everything being so up in the air for me.”

My thoughts of escape come to a screeching halt. Oh . This is just a quick fuck for him—a seduce-and-dump kind of situation.

“Uhuh,” I murmur. His dark eyes lock onto mine, and all the air goes out in the room.

“But I can’t ignore that the thought of leaving you scares the ever-living shit out of me.”

I swallow hard.

“So, what are you saying?”

He gets up and starts pacing in front of me, gripping the back of his neck with his free hand. His nervous energy is palpable from where I’m sitting.

“God. I told him I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Told who?” My hackles are back up, ready to bolt.

“My cousin. He’s been giving me shit about you. Over how much I like you.” He comes back over, sets his cup down, and grabs both my hands in his. “He wants me to end it with you.”

“And you don’t want to.”

He shakes his head back and forth. “I want you, but I don’t...I can’t...”

“Why can’t you?” My heart is squeezing with anxiety, trying to understand. This short time that I’ve gotten to know him has been some of the best of my whole life. With Max, I finally felt like I had found a home—a person to claim as mine. None of what he’s saying makes any sense, but he’s right. The thought of not being with him fills me with panic. Now that my sleep-addled brain has had a moment to calm down and I don’t think he’s going to murder me, I reach up and cup his face, staring up at him. “You can tell me.”

His eyes screw shut with anguish. “If I tell you, you have to promise to hear me out. Start to finish.”

“O-okay.”

“This is serious, Bella. Go to jail or get the electric chair kind of serious.”

Oh God, maybe he’s in the mafia. All that talk of taking a break from the family business. I lick my lips, staring at the man before me who’s sunk his teeth into my heart. I see the man he is with me. The one that makes me feel things that I’ve never felt before.

Decision made, I reiterate, “You can tell me, Max.”

His shoulders slump, in relief or with despair, I can’t tell, but nothing prepares me for the words that come out of his mouth. “The CEO, who’s been on the news. I’m the one who kidnapped him. And then I killed him.”

CHAPTER 16

Maximo

By the way she's looking at me, her eyes wide and unsure, I don't know what to do. Christ, she hasn't blinked in over a minute, and I'm wondering if she's about to have a stroke or something. Not only is Rocco going to kill me, I'm going to kill me because what the fuck was I thinking. Jesus Christ, I heard her run up the stairs halfway through my conversation with him, and seeing the panic on her face when I came into the room, I knew there was no way out of this.

"Bella." I reach out to touch her, but she immediately steps back out of my grasp, holding her index finger between us. Silently telling me to stop.

"Shut up." She breathes, finally blinking. "I...I don't..." bringing her fingers to her mouth, a flutter of giggles leave her throat. "You're joking...this is a joke. Yeah, this has to be a joke." She begins pacing back and forth around the room, and if this were related to anything else, I'd probably be laughing at her. But unfortunately, there isn't a single thing about this situation that is even remotely funny.

"Julia."

"You? No way. No, I don't believe it." She begins babbling, walking around the room with one hand pressed to her head and the other on her hip. "You're like this...this really like...you're a nice guy, Max. You're sweet and funny. And are you serious?" She looks at me then. "Oh, my fucking god...you're serious. I need to sit down."

“Okay, sit, sit on the bed.”

She sits but immediately jumps back up. “No, no, I need to stand. In fact, I need a drink...actually...Max, I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Julia,” I take hold of both her hands. Her eyes train on where they connect with her skin before flicking them back up to meet my eyes. “I need you to breathe, okay. This isn’t good for you. If you can just relax, and we can?—”

“Are you going to kill me? Please don’t kill me.” Her eyes swell with unshed tears. “Max, I swear to God I won’t—fuck! Is that even your real name...this is just too much. I don’t even...”

I lead her to the bed and help her sit down, crouching at her feet. The fact that she’s wearing my shirt doesn’t go amiss, but now is not the right time for my cock to get any illusions of grandeur about fucking her again.

“Julia, I’m not going to kill you. That’s not at all why I brought you here. I just...you promised you’d listen to me. If you don’t like what I say, I swear on my father’s memory I will take you right back to your apartment, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

Her beautiful eyes flick back and forth between mine like she’s weighing up the options.

“Promise me?”

“I’ll promise you whatever you need for me to convince you that I would never hurt you. I’m not that kind of man.” I watch her silently stare at me, so I tell her what she wants to hear. “I swear I’m not going to kill you, okay?”

“O-okay.” She presses her lips together in a tight line, shrugging her hands from my grasp and placing them in her lap.

“You obviously know who John Richardson is,” I sigh. “He was the man responsible for my father’s death.”

I watch as her features fade from panicked to solemn.

“But not just my father’s, many people in this world. Removing specific medication from insurance lists so that patients in hospitals have to pay through the nose for treatment. Refusing to support sick people’s health care, he was a vile human who did some heinous acts, Julia.” I take a breath, steadying myself before I continue. “My father had an extremely rare form of cancer, one that, over a very short space of time, turned him from a man that was busy every single day, running marathons and working twelve-hour shifts, to someone that could barely fucking lift a fork to feed himself.”

“Max—”

“He got sick so quickly that neither myself nor my mother knew what to do. It didn’t matter how many forms we filled out, doctor trips we took, or hospital stays he had, John Richardson’s company always shot us down. I ran through my savings, and my mother through hers. We remortgaged our house and my father’s business to pay for his care, but even then, it wasn’t enough. Nothing was ever enough.”

The burn at the back of my throat reaches my nose, and now I’m the one who feels like they’re going to throw up. I never should’ve told her. There’s no way someone as kind as her will ever take a chance on someone like me after this.

“When he died, I decided to look up the company. My cousin, Rocco and I got together with his brother, and we started looking into John and what he was

doing...why he was doing it. Rocco's brother is a computer genius. He hacked into the company's mainframe and managed to find out everything this man had done."

"L-like what?" She asks me, and maybe this means she doesn't think I'm a fucking despicable human. Who knows.

"He created an AI system that would randomly choose the sickest patients on the list, automatically denying them healthcare insurance. Then it would go through different medical problems and randomly select medication, operations, treatments, and take them off the list, causing patients and their families to pay thousands of dollars in bills to keep their family members comfortable."

I stand up, running my hands through my hair, and now I'm the one pacing the room. She's sitting there, on the bed in my fucking shirt, looking like a lost puppy, sadness and fear ever evident on her features, and I fucking hate myself for it. I hate that I'm the one who put her in this position.

"After I saw all the terrible things he had done to people and found out that it wasn't even a human dealing with those claims, I knew I needed to do something. The cops wouldn't give a fuck about the information, but I'd be blamed for illegally hacking the company. So that wouldn't work. I've never hurt a single person in my life," I stop, turning to face her. "My mother raised me better than to be a man who thrives off of the pain of others, but this...I couldn't let this go. So, my cousin and I watched him, studied every move he made, and after a year of it, we kidnapped him...and I shot him in cold blood in the middle of an abandoned warehouse."

Julia gasps then, both hands covering her mouth in shock, tears spilling over her lower lash line and bouncing onto the apples of her pink cheeks. Reaching into my pocket, I lift the white piece of paper from the denim and hold it out in front of her.

"I planned on telling you when we got here, so I printed off the list of names to help

you see why I did it. It lists every single person he hurt. Every person who passed away because of his negligence and stupidity. Here, take a look at it.” I release a heavy sigh as I place it into her hands. “I’ll be downstairs. Take some time to think and read the list. If you still want to go home after processing that, I promise I’ll take you.”

Taking a few steps back, I leave the room and close the door behind me, wondering if I wasted my time or if she will understand my reasonings.

CHAPTER 17

Julia

My eyes are full of unshed tears, yet I manage to scan the list of names in my hand as my mind whirls at a million miles a minute. Name after name unfolds before me, like something you would see at the end of a movie—pages of them. Maybe I'm in shock, but I can't stop looking at the sheer number of names in my hands.

Every single name was a person desperate for the care they needed but denied with a swipe of the computer. Imagine seeing these and turning them away anyway. How could he?

As my eyes roam, they snag on one glaringly familiar name, and all the breath in my lungs exhales sharply.

No.

But there it is. Unmistakable in black and white. My mother's name. Claim denied.

It's like a stab to the gut all over again. I'm right back in that hospital room, begging the doctor to do something—anything, to save her. The phone calls with the robotic-sounding answering service for hours at a time, trying to get a hold of someone who would listen. It all comes flooding back, and I see red. Fury pumps through my veins, and a dark thought slithers through my mind—I'm glad the man responsible for so much evil is dead.

I admonish myself. What would mother say if she knew your thoughts just now.

But you know what? My mother isn't here. What my mom would want is to still be here. To binge-watch *Gilmore Girls* one more time, hearing her giggle along to the witty banter, talking about how much she loves Luke, and look at me lovingly saying, "That's us, kid." when talking about Lorelai and Rory.

That man, that CEO, helped take her from me. She had the chance to stay here with me for five to ten more years. The studies on the medication showed she could have had a chance. She was a prime candidate. All her levels checked out. Her team of medical professionals were all on board. The only thing that stopped my mom from receiving the medication she so desperately needed was the goddamn insurance company.

Each of these names was a person with a similar story to ours.

A life.

A loved one. Countless hopes and dreams were all cut short by the vile greed of one man.

I stand, papers falling, but the one with my mother's name is crumpled tightly in my fist.

Anger, hot and visceral—full of sharp edges and vicious truths, bubbles up inside of me. It's as if someone is holding an iron to my skin, boiling my veins until the rage takes over my entire body, making me stomp off in search of Max.

I find him slumped over his knees, hands cradling his head. His gaze snaps to mine instantly, and he jumps to his feet.

“Bella—”

“Did you know?” I’m practically vibrating.

“Kn-know what?” His arms are raised in surrender, but I step closer, waving the paper in front of his face.

“That her name was on this list?”

His eyes dart around my face, searching for what I don’t know.

“Who’s name?”

“My mother’s!” The words are practically dripping with venom.

I see the moment it lands, hitting him like a swift punch to the gut. His eyebrows raise, and dark eyes widen as his mouth falls. “I had no idea, I swear.”

His hands grip my arms, thumbs rubbing along the backs. I can feel myself sway forward, craving his touch. The soothing feel of his skin on mine, chasing away the ghosts that threaten to break me.

“He helped kill her.” I manage to say, my words coming out shaken, the anger ebbing into something more devastating, something that sounds too close to the grief that I’ve carried with me since her passing.

Max pulls me towards him, and I give in, letting him cradle me. Forehead to forehead, his dark eyes bore into mine. “And now he can never hurt anyone ever again.”

A sob wrenches free from my throat, and my knees give, crumpling us both to the

ground in a heap of tangled limbs and broken hearts. Both of us left scarred by the actions of this man, made under the guise of saving money when, in reality, it was meant to fatten his already thick pockets.

“I—miss—her,” I say, gasping between sobs.

His hands run down the back of my head, pulling me into his strong chest. I grip onto him as tears fall freely.

“I know.” He says, and I stare up at him, tears tracking my face, my lashes heavy with the weight of them.

Max is a murderer, but so was that CEO. One drew blood with a gun, and the other with a news release and a smile on his face, being praised by the cameras.

So why is one more acceptable than the other?

Max and his cousins are being hunted by the authorities. I’ve seen the videos begging for people with any information to come forward. The reward money is being flashed about before our eyes like a lure. The disgust the media is trying to elicit from an uncaring public. Surprise, people stop caring when you keep screwing them over. How can you expect us to care when they clearly don’t care about us?

I reach up and touch Max’s face, where a tear of his own has escaped and trailed down his prominent cheek bone.

“She would have liked you.”

He chuckles at that. “I would have loved to have met the woman who raised the woman who’s captured my heart.”

This thing between us should have me packing up and running in the other direction.

Why, then, do I find myself reaching for him, bringing his lips down to mine? Our mouths brushing together gently, tasting like salty tears and an unspoken promise.

CHAPTER 18

Maximo

It's gentle, with more meaning behind it than any kiss I've had before. When she asked me if I knew her mother's name was on that list, I swore up and down that I didn't, and it was the truth. I know that under the question was also ' did you target me? ' Again, no. Julia was a surprise I never saw coming—a light in the past year of aching devastation and rage.

The way she's kissing me now is as though she has loved me for centuries, an emotion so deep within the kiss I can't bring myself to pull back, but I have to. She's an emotional wreck right now, and as much as I am too, I need to be the one stopping her from making any rash decisions before she's thought about what she wants to do regarding me, us, and whatever this is.

“ Bella ,” I murmur the second she crawls forward a few inches to straddle me. My shirt is still on her gorgeous fucking body, and my brain reaaally needs to match up with my dick because right now, I'm hard as a fucking rock.

“Hmm?” The vibration of the hum flutters across my lips, her tongue sliding along the seam, arms clasped behind my neck, with a hand tightly gripping my hair.

Ffuuuck!

“Baby, stop. Just gimme a second.”

She pulls back, bloodshot eyes searching mine with the shed tears that linger there from her broken heart. “Max, please.” She begs lightly, “I don’t want to think right now, so don’t ask me to stop.”

I should not be so turned on right now.

I can feel my length thickening further, angry for release and desperate to slide itself inside her core. Lifting one hand, I brush her hair back from her face, and the pink blotches on her skin only make her more beautiful in every aspect of this moment. Who am I to stop her from anything, to make the decision for her...so I don’t.

Fuck.

“Okay, Bella , tell me what you want.”

“I-I...” she stutters, her eyes searching mine.

“Use your words, talk to me.”

Leaning into me—her soft lips meeting the shell of my ear—she drops down further, grinning, her heat against me, and my growl is almost instant. And with her hot breath fanning against my skin, she finally speaks.

“I want you to fuck me, Max. Fuck me so hard that I forget, because right now...I don’t want to feel anything but you.”

Maybe Rocco was right, because after that...yeah, I’m in love.

I close my eyes, steadying myself. “Fuck, Julia.”

“You want me to beg?” She continues. “Please, Max, make me come...make me

scream your?—”

Her words are cut off the moment my hand wraps around her throat like a collar, nudging her back so I can look at her. All my restraint snaps in a millisecond. “You want me to fuck you, make you come all over my cock, Bella. ” She nods furiously in response. “Okay, take my cock out.”

Julia’s fingers frantically work at the tie on my sweats, yanking the knot free before she reaches behind the elastic waist, pulling my cock free. Her warm hand and tiny little fingers wrap so perfectly around it I groan as she pumps me a few times.

I place both my hands under the top of each thigh, just below her ass. Then I curl my fingers into the fabric of her delicate little panties and pull them to one side, revealing just how wet and desperate she is.

“So wet.”

“Yes.” She hums.

Bringing her forward, I hoist her entire body above the crown of my cock, teasing her a little with just the tip.

“Max, fuck...don’t...do that.” Her words come through needy breaths, and I smile.

“Okay.”

I shrug, and with her hands resting on my shoulders for balance, I drop her down into my lap. Impaling her with every inch of my cock that belongs to her. Her muffled scream of pleasure is instantaneous. Her teeth bite into the skin on my shoulder.

“No, Julia.” Threading my hand into her hair, I fist it and drag her head back to face

me. “You want me to fuck you, then you’re going to give me every...fucking...scream that belongs to me. Do you understand?”

She nods.

“Words, Bella .” I can barely fucking hold on here myself.

“Yes...okay...I understand.”

“Good,” I lean in further. “So, fuck yourself on my cock, beautiful girl.”

Her moans begin filling the air. Deep, guttural, and almost animalistic in their tone, and fuck me if the tune of her sexual pleasure doesn’t bring me closer to the edge with her. Reaching up, I grip my shirt, tearing it from her body and allowing her perfect tits to spring free from the cotton enclosure. I latch onto her peaked nipple and suck.

“Oh my God!” She cries out. “Fuck, you feel so good!”

My hands grip her hips, helping her bounce up and down on me.

“Shit, Julia! Look at your sweet pussy choking my cock.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” She moans with each thrust. Our skin glistens with a sheen of sweat already. I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her tight to me while using the other hand to press against the fabric of the couch, bringing myself to a standing position. And with all her weight in my grasp, I carry her towards the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Pressing her back to the cold glass, I curve one hand under her knee and spread it around me, and her other leg falls from my waist, balancing herself on the sole of her

foot. I fuck her into the window. Hard and fast.

Grabbing the hair at the top of her head, I angle it down. “Watch, Julia. Watch me fuck what’s mine. Look at how perfect your cunt looks, taking every inch of my cock.” I growl possessively.

“Your.”

Thrust.

“Fucking.”

Thrust .

“Mine.”

“Fuck!” She cries out. “I’m gonna come!”

Pulling all the way out of her, I chuckle. “Not yet, you’re not.” I drop to my knees in front of her, waiting a few seconds for her orgasm to slowly dissipate before spinning her hips and forcing her to face the window. I press one hand to her lower back and grin, her curvy ass directly in my face. Arching it towards me. I press one hand to each ass cheek and spread her open, her pussy and tight little asshole on full display.

The remnants of her wetness glistening against her lower lips. “Scream for me, Bella.” I moan deeply before latching my mouth onto her core and devouring her.

CHAPTER 19

Julia

We're on full display, pressed up against the window. I can see the reflection of us staring back at me, while just beyond lays the frozen lake dotted with several cabins. Any of them could be inhabited, heightening the chance that someone could see us. And fuck, does that turn me on.

I've never been so free with anyone in all my life.

Most of my hook-ups were done in a bed, lights off with nothing but a few grunts passed between us. But this? Spread wide on the window, inviting someone to see how well Max pleasures me? It sends shivers along my sweat-soaked skin.

His hot breath flutters over my sensitive clit as he licks my pussy, shoving his tongue between my slit. He alternates between sucking and thrusting his tongue inside me, building me up into a frenzy.

My hips rock backward of their own volition, riding his face and spurring him on. The embers of my orgasm cling to my body, building back up as his long fingers find their way to my dripping pussy, gathering the wetness on the pads of his fingers.

He drags it up to my hole in the back, circling it. I can see his hungered expression in the reflection of the glass. Looking every bit the dangerously hot criminal he is.

"Stay still, Bella. " He commands, shoving a finger into my puckered hole. I gasp at

the intrusion, feeling the slight burn. I try to escape it, wiggling forward, but he keeps me pressed against the glass with nowhere to go.

“Relax. Breathe into it.” He works his finger in and out, pressing his mouth back to my clit and licking around the sensitive bundle of nerves. The dueling sensations work in tandem, turning the slight discomfort into an all-consuming need.

“Oh, shit. Max!”

I can feel his lips shift into a smirk. He’s enjoying this. The way he can turn me into putty in his capable, sinful hands.

His hips jerk wildly as he pumps in and out of me. I feel him slide another digit into me with his free hand. This time in my pussy. Then another. The bridge of his nose is pressing hard against me, and I fear that he won’t be able to breathe.

I try to angle away from him, but he grabs me aggressively.

“Don’t you fucking move. I’m not done here yet.” His commanding tone does something to my insides that has my stomach doing flips. “I’m not done until I have your sweet cum dripping down my face and all over my tongue. Do you hear me?”

I nod my head yes, only to receive a nip to my pussy.

“Ah! Fuck.”

“Words, Bella. Use them.”

“Y-yes, okay. Make me come on your face.”

He smirks. “That’s what I want to hear.”

My legs quiver as he resumes his mission, this time going even harder. The way he sucks on my clit has me seeing stars. I lock my knees to keep from crashing to the ground as I ride out the waves of pleasure he's giving me. I feel his tongue lick and thrust up against me, urging me into another orgasm. I come hard and fast, feeling the surge of cum spray out of me almost violently.

He drinks it up greedily. "Fuck yes." He murmurs, lapping up every last drop.

I slide down the glass, unable to hold myself vertically anymore. He grabs me by the hip and turns me into him, lying down on the carpeted floor.

"You did so fucking good." He says, face glistening with my cum.

I glow from his praise. "You weren't so bad yourself."

Before he extracts himself from me, he lands a punishing smack on my bottom before he jumps up and runs over to the kitchen. "Not so bad?" He scoffs. "Remind me to fuck you until you pass out next time."

I watch him as he runs. Feeling spent but also happy. Next time.

He looks almost boyish as he comes rushing back to my side with a damp towel.

Max takes his time pampering me and ensuring I'm cleaned up before he moves on to himself.

A host of unspoken things lay between us. Reality and decisions that we must make linger on the edges of our blissful post-coital bubble, threatening to change everything.

I try to push those thoughts from my head, enjoying how Max caters to me, looking at

me as if he may love me. I try. But I fail.

Questions of what comes next sit heavy on my tongue—wanting to escape.

He hands me a plush blanket, and I wrap it around myself, thankful for the warmth. Not having his body on mine has the cold from the window starting to seep into my bones.

Max tucks me against him, and we lean against the couch, legs stretched out under the coffee table and my head resting along his shoulder. It's amazing that this man is a killer and yet has the capacity to be so gentle.

A deep rumble comes from Max's chest while I rake my fingers through his hair, running down the back of his head and onto the nape of his neck.

"I could stay here forever. Just you and me in this cabin." His eyes are closed, and his hand finds my thigh, rubbing small circles absentmindedly.

"Why don't we?" I murmur. "I'll quit my job and take on a new identity. Leave everything behind. Learn how to forage for food in the forest."

"I fear you'd be foraging a long time. There's not much around."

"Well, then maybe I'll learn how to ice fish."

He chuckles.

"I'd like to see that."

It's silly and far-fetched, but the fiction we've created is a balm to my dark, impending thoughts. Worrying that maybe this thing between us can't go further than

our time here.

On the rustic wooden coffee table, Max's phone begins to vibrate.

We both still, as it rings out, hoping that it's nothing important. Two seconds later, it starts up again.

"Sorry, I have to?—"

"It's fine." I tuck my legs up to my chest as he grabs his phone, answering it with a curt, "What?"

He jolts like he's just been slapped and then hurriedly looks at his phone. "Shit, shit, shit."

My heart rate rises, and I feel my anxiety tighten around my middle, wondering what could have him freaking out right now. A quick glance at his screen shows me article after article of breaking news.

They've found the CEO's body.

CHAPTER 20

Maximo

It's everywhere.

Newspapers. Podcasts. The radio. Christ, it's practically all over every social media platform I can think of.

Except, there's a problem. Well, it's not a problem. It's really more of a surprise. People are talking about me like I'm a hero, as though everything I did was right. And I can't understand it. I thought that when everything was found out, people would curse me and hate me...but...they're calling me 'the people's voice.'

It's been two days since everything broke to the media and my recording of what John admitted to was leaked. One thing I know, the internet is forever. I spoke to Rocco last night, and we decided to move the flight earlier, but since then, I haven't heard a word from him.

No matter how many times I call, text, or email, there's nothing. It's radio silence, and I'm losing my composure.

"Max?" Julia calls sweetly from behind me. I look over my shoulder, and my eyes meet hers. Worry spreads over her beautiful features, and I'm unsure what to do. I'm worried about my lack of contact with my cousin, but I'm also worried about what this is doing to the girl I should've walked away from.

Julia moves around the couch, and I follow her every step of the way. “Max, I...when I tell you this, I need you to stay calm.”

Lifting my hands, I cup her cheeks. Waiting for the words to come out of her mouth to tell me she’s leaving, returning home, and wanting to forget about this whole ordeal.

“What is it, Bella ?”

“It’s...It’s Rocco.”

“What?” I stand up, “Did he call? Is he here?”

“N-no, baby...”

“Then what? Tell me, Julia, you’re scaring me right now.”

Taking her phone from her back pocket, she unlocks the screen and turns it to me, and that’s when I see it.

“SUSPECT IN CEO KILLING FOUND AND ARRESTED. ROCCO AGOSTI, 24, SUSPECTED OF KILLING 48-YEAR-OLD CEO JOHN RICHARDSON. SURVIVED BY HIS WIFE ANGELA RICHARDSON.”

My eyes widen, my body shaking with the panic, rage, and a whole mismatch of emotions that I can’t quite place. My chest expands, my breathing short. I can feel the panic attack rapidly filling every part of my being and my heart beating so heavily against my chest that I don’t know how I’m going to calm it down.

“H-how long ago was this posted?”

“I don’t know, I only just saw it.”

I run my hands over my face, pushing them up and into my short hair. Fisting it tightly. “I need to go to the station, make a statement, tell them it was me and that he had nothing to do with it.” I spin on my heel, snatching the keys from the bowl by the door.

But the moment I grab the handle, Julia places herself between me and the cabin door.

“Julia, please move.”

“Just...please wait a-and listen to me. I?—”

“What?” I shout. “What do I need to wait for? My fucking cousin is in jail!”

Fuck!

She doesn’t deserve this.

“I have an idea.” She murmurs.

“Bella, I’m sorry I...I shouldn’t have shouted at you. I just...I don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do. Either way, I lose.”

She grasps my face, her delicate fingers spread over my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Max. I know this fucking sucks, but if you listen to my idea, I think it could work.”

CHAPTER 21

Julia

The ride back to the city is long. They're holding Rocco in a temporary detention center, with plans to move him to a permanent facility. While Max has gone to great lengths to cover his identity, someone recognized Rocco by his shirt. It won't be long before the feds start sniffing around the rest of the family. Which means Max is in hot shit if they catch on.

Max has already disabled and tossed his phone, switching to a burner.

If I had any doubt that I'm dating a criminal, there's none now.

We're both quiet. Turning over the anxiety of what's at stake while the radio plays Christmas tunes. I'm feeling anything but festive.

If they find out that Max is associated, we're both going down. I had the opportunity to leave, but I'm in this now. And what I plan to do next makes me even more guilty.

Rocco doesn't deserve the fate of being locked up or worse. And seeing Max this distraught is killing me. The man feels things so deeply, especially for his family. They're everything to him.

And he's everything to me.

The detention center is cold and ominous when we arrive. Windowless and made of

concrete, the thing stands at least five stories high and is surrounded by several layers of fencing, complete with barbed wire laced in threatening loops along the tops. There's no escaping here. The place is filled with armed police and guards stationed at every exit and at several looming towers, scoping the ground for anyone out of place. I can feel their eyes on me as I move through the security system. Their guns trained on my body. One wrong move, and I'm toast.

The female guard with a snarl permanently etched on her face, is assigned to pat me down before allowing me through.

Max and I agreed that I would come in here alone. Having him inside this place is asking for trouble. Rocco and Max are clearly related. Just one look at them can confirm it. Someone could connect him to that video and then it's game over.

"I'm clean, I swear," I assure the guard. She gives me a bored look and asks me to strip.

Somewhere in my brain, I knew this was a possibility. Though I hoped it wouldn't come to this. Still, I comply, removing the layers until I'm shivering in the fluorescent-lit room. Her hands go down the length of my body and in every crevice. The white-painted walls seem to close in around me as she checks under my tits, making me hold my arms in the air.

"Okay, now, turn and face the wall and spread your legs."

"My legs?"

"You heard me, spread them, or I'll do it for you."

"A-alright."

“You can always pick out the newbies. They shake like a leaf.” Her hands find my ass crack, and I involuntarily squeeze. “Relax, or this will only get worse.”

I nod my head and will my body to calm the fuck down.

“She’s clean. You can put your clothes back on.”

I snatch them as quickly as physically possible, trying to push away the feeling of being violated.

It seems like it takes ages for them to bring out Rocco, but once they do, I know it’s him immediately. Even if Max hadn’t shown me a picture before I came in here, I’d still be able to recognize them as being related.

Rocco has the same dark hair and eyes as Max, but his build is smaller, and he sports two distinct holes where an eyebrow piercing used to be on his right side. He has a myriad of tattoos that peek out over the collar of his orange jumpsuit. I know Tasha would cream her pants if I showed her this guy’s mugshot.

He sits down across from me, brows furrowed with confusion.

We pick up the phone at the same time, but before he can fuck everything up, I start talking. “I can’t believe they mistook you for the murderer! Don’t worry, I’m going to tell them how you were with me all night. Are they treating you alright in here? Is there anything they’ll let me get you? Cigarettes? The unfiltered ones?”

He does a good job of picking up what I’m putting down, especially since I used the code word, cigarettes, that Max gave me. One they all agreed on if things went tits up.

“It’s so good to see you, baby.”

His eyes flick to my name badge, which I had the good sense of writing my name on in giant letters.

“What can you tell me? Why is this happening?”

He leans forward, placing his hand on the smudged glass. I do the same, playing into the idea that we’re a couple. “Julia, they’re just looking to pin this on someone, and I guess they think I fit the description, but the guys in that video didn’t even have an eyebrow piercing.” He gestures to the now missing piece of jewelry. They probably made him take it out.

“How can I help?”

“Just let them know where I was that night.” His dark eyes bore into mine, pleading.

“I will.”

“Times up.” The guard grabs Rocco up by his arm, yanking him aggressively. Sometimes, I think there are guys who get into that profession because they get off on bullying others. It’s clear by how rough the guard handles Rocco on the way out that he falls into that category. The guard is wearing a smirk on his smug face, like he’s enjoying the power he holds over him.

We need to get him out of here. There’s no knowing what will become of him in a place like this if that’s how they treat him out in the open.

I just hope they believe my story.

“I told you, it’s a new relationship. He came into the coffee shop, and we’ve been out a handful of times. He was with me that whole night.” My frustration is mounting as the lead detective grills me. I’ve been in this tiny room for hours, and my head is

pounding.

Going to see Rocco was an essential step in my plan. A girlfriend would want to make sure her man was okay. I'm just glad he didn't give away my true identity.

The detective throws a grainy-looking picture taken from the video on the table. It's zoomed in on Rocco's half-hidden face.

"You're trying to tell me your boyfriend isn't this man?"

I raise my eyebrow and look at the photo. "I already told you it's not. He was with me." From that angle it could be anyone. They're just looking to place blame, I tell myself, as I raise my chin.

The detective's face is gaunt-looking under the harsh fluorescent lights that continuously buzz in the background. His receding hairline is peppered with streaks of grey, and his under eyes are streaked purple.

"You understand that you could be charged with obstruction of justice?" I do my best not to sweat under the pressure.

This seemed like such a better idea in the cabin. Now that I'm here, it's seeming less like a brilliant stroke of genius and more like a way that's going to land me in my own orange jumpsuit. I don't care what that show says about orange being the new black. It's not my color, and I know it. It makes my blonde hair look brassy and turns my skin pallor into one that looks sallow.

They release me with a promise to be in touch. I can't get to the car fast enough. I need a shower, my bed, and the most comfortable pair of pajamas I own.

"How did it go? Do you think it worked?" Max asks. I don't miss the hopeful lilt to

his tone.

“I don’t know.” Either they’ll believe my flimsy alibi, or they’ll arrest my ass and Max along with me if they discover the truth.

CHAPTER 22

Maximo

My knee hasn't stopped jerking since watching Julia step out of my car and make her way into the detention center to be the alibi for my fucking idiot cousin, Rocco. It should bother me that she wants to help. The feeling should sit low in my gut and make me feel sick, but it doesn't.

I watched her walk away from me, my eyes only leaving her back when she disappeared through the steel grey door and out of sight. The thought of her cracking when being interrogated filled me with a type of fear I hadn't felt since I knew I was going to lose my father.

She's the most incredible woman I've met and had the pleasure of being around, and I can't seem to make the feelings I have for her stop. I didn't intend for this, didn't want to drag anyone else into this, but here she is, saving our asses like she knew the plan from the day I met her.

The fact she doesn't care that I killed a man, that she comforted me when she found me in the living room lost in thought, blows my mind. I checked my watch for the tenth time since she left, and it's like time hasn't passed. I hope they believe her and let her walk free and that my cousin—who is more like a brother to me—walks out soon after she does.

Julia is a woman I never expected, but also a woman I'm not prepared to let go of, no matter the consequences.

CHAPTER 23

Rocco

If I didn't think my cousin would beat the shit out of me for touching her, I'd bend Julia into a fucking lawn chair and please her with my mouth for her bravery. The police officer watching me came to my cell about an hour ago, spewing venom about having to let me go. And all I could do was laugh my ass off.

Dickhead.

When the eight cop cars pulled me over on the side of the road after my call with Max, I knew the jig was up. The only thing I could think of, care about, was if he and his Tinkerbell were okay.

Yeah, Tinkerbell .

She looks exactly like that little fairy—cute button nose, blonde hair, and some kind of magic that has made my cousin fall head over heels for her. He won't admit it, but the guys got it bad. And honestly, I can see why. She may have been lying through her ass when she sat down to talk to me through the plexiglass of the detention center, but I could see every emotion in her eyes.

She was scared. Worried. And I couldn't understand how someone who doesn't even know me, would put their own freedom on the line to help get me out of jail.

I walk through the metal detector and approach the desk where an officer sits, looking

at me like an animal.

“Where’s my shit, Chief Wiggum!”

“Excuse me?”

“Y’know, the cop from The Simpsons. You look just like him.” I snort, grabbing my wallet and burner phone from the counter when he places them there. “Don’t tell me you don’t watch it?”

“No.” He grunts.

“So uncultured...anyway. Thanks for the stay. I’ll make sure to review it on Airbnb...zero out of ten, would not recommend.” I chuckle loudly as I walk to the door and back into the outside world.

The moment the iron wrought gates open for me to pass through. I hold my arms out beside me, releasing a loud bellow of laughter. There, just outside, Julia and Max lean against the rented black SUV.

“You clever motherfucker!” I shout, jogging towards him, embracing Max in the tightest of hugs. A man that’s more than my fucking cousin. He’s my brother in every way possible.

“It wasn’t my idea.” He says as he moves back from the hug. “It was all Julia.”

“You’re fucking kidding me!” My eyes widen as I look between the both of them. “You,” I wrap my arms around her waist, lifting her off the ground and spinning her around, “are a fucking genius girl!”

Her sweet laughter permeates the air, and I grin. “You’re welcome.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Max grumbles, and I put her down.

“Y’know,” I look at Julia, nodding my head towards Max as I speak. “If you’re looking for a better lover, I can help.” The feeling of Max’s palm connecting to the back of my head makes me jolt. “Hey!”

“Shut the fuck up and get in the car, asshole!”

“Alright, alright. Let’s go back to the cabin. There’re a few things we need to talk about.” I wink in Julia’s direction, and by the look on my cousin’s face, I see that he hates the way I look at her. Not that I would do anything because she’s not my type. She’s all his.

Yeah, my cousin... is, in fact...in love.

CHAPTER 24

Julia

The cabin looks like we never left. Rocco immediately makes himself at home, putting his feet on the coffee table like he owns the place.

“Shoes off the table.” Max snaps. He’s been high-strung the whole ride here.

“Alright, chill out, coz,” Rocco says, hands up in surrender as he kicks off his shoes.

While they’ve let Rocco go, for now, I know they’re still watching his movements like a hawk. They might not have enough to go on, but all it would take is another piece of evidence, and this whole thing will come crashing down like a house of cards.

“They told me not to leave the state in case they need to question me again.”

“They said the same to me.”

Max paces in front of the windows so many times I fear he will leave a permanent line in the carpet.

“We’re supposed to be leaving for Sicily. Now, what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“Calm down, we planned for this. We lay low. Pretend that Julia and I here are an

item and wait out the cops until it's safe to go." He winks at me, and I stifle a chuckle, knowing it's just to piss Max off.

"If you think I'm going to be okay with you and Julia?—"

"I'm right here," I say, hands on my hips. "And you agreed to this plan, Max."

"Cousin, you know I would never take your girl."

"Fucking right, you won't." Max quips, arms crossed along his broad chest.

Everything is so complicated. And I still have loads of bills that I need to pay. The time off from work is dwindling to a close, and to top things off, Max said he and his cousin are planning to leave for Sicily. I don't know where I fit in with all of this. All I know is that I'm desperate to see him free. Even if that meant he'd be living somewhere without me. We can at least enjoy our time together now while we still can.

A loud knock comes from the door, and the three of us freeze.

"Shit," Rocco exclaims, scrambling off the couch to hide.

The knock comes again—louder and more persistent. The car is right outside, so it's not like we can pretend we aren't here. I go to open it up, and Max shakes his head no. I ignore his command and am met by a mace-wielding Tasha.

"Holy fucking shit!" She says, launching herself at me with a mace clutched in her hands.

"What the hell?"

Snow clings to her hair as she grips my arms tightly. “What the hell, me? What the hell, YOU! You disappear on me, and I see your location go to a motherfucking prison without so much as a ‘hey I,I’m alive’ text. Then you’re back up in this dingy cabin.”

“Dingy?” Max scoffs.

She points the mace at him. “I will use this.”

He puts his hands up in surrender.

“Now, are you okay?” Tasha looks at me, and I feel like a shitty-ass friend for leaving her out of the loop. Of course, she would traipse after me, making sure I’m okay.

“I’m fine, I promise. You can put down the mace and get inside. It’s freezing.” I step aside and Max’s jaw is tight with tension.

Tasha breezes in, scanning the place like she’s on the lookout for an unseen threat, when she spots Rocco. He gives her a wolfish smile and prowls toward her. “Who’s this?”

Tasha turns to me, mouth dropped. “You sly little slut. Are you doing them both?”

Max is quick to respond, “No.” Just as Rocco says, “Yes.”

Tasha’s eyebrows go up as she looks between the three of us.

An unspoken conversation seems to flit between the two cousins before Max concedes. “Fuck it. Fine. Yeah. That’s what’s happening.”

Tasha eyes me, and I grab her by the wrist and drag her into the upstairs bedroom.

Once I close the door behind me, she shoves my arm hard. “You bitch. You better spill.”

I stare into the concerned eyes of my best friend. She knows me better than anyone. But if I tell her the truth, then I’ll be putting her in danger. Even her being here is dangerous in and of itself. The thought of something happening to her because of me causes my stomach to churn. So, I lie to the one person I’ve always been truthful with.

“Well, that’s Rocco, Max’s cousin. And you know, funny story, the cops completely mistook him for that CEO killer, you know, the one we were talking about, but see, Max introduced us, and it was an instant connection. They wanted to share, and I couldn’t make up my mind, so I thought, why not both.” I’m rambling, and she fixes me with the most withering stare, calling me on my bullshit.

“I should slap you right now for that load of crap you just tried to feed me.” She says, crossing her arms and lifting her professionally sculpted eyebrow. She knows me far too well. I should have known I wouldn’t have been able to hide shit from Tasha.

“Fine. But listen, I don’t want to put you in a bad position, and that’s the only reason I lied to you just now.”

“Jules, are you in trouble?”

I bite my lower lip, unsure of how to answer. “Define trouble.”

“Fuck. They did it, didn’t they? They killed that CEO, and you’re covering for them.”

“I...how did you?—”

“Jules, please. I’ve known you since we were teenagers. You remember that guy you

had a crush on during freshman year. He was caught stealing the answers for the Algebra test because his sister had been sick, and you tried to help him get out of it?”

“Yeah.” I lean my head against the wall.

“You have a soft spot for bad boys doing things for a noble cause. Always have. That’s why you’re constantly falling for the morally gray villains in those books you read.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t knock the smut. I’ll get you hooked on it one day, and then you’ll find yourself lusting after a fictional man yourself, and I’ll laugh and say I told you so.”

A moment of silence passes between us. The weight of my actions laid bare before us.

“I’m sorry,” I say, meaning it wholeheartedly. Tasha has been there for me more than anyone, especially after my mom passed.

Tasha nods her head, accepting my apology. “You really like this guy, huh.”

“Tash. I think I love him.”

“Well, shit.”

I let out a laugh. “Yeah.”

“So, the cousin?” Her eyes are wide, and I know that look. God help Rocco. Once Tasha has her mind set on someone, there’s no escape.

“He’s free. I’m only his alibi.”

“Hmm.” She taps her nail to her chin. “Well, let’s not keep those boys waiting.”

CHAPTER 25

Rocco

And just like that, my cock is fighting with the zipper on my jeans because, apparently, I've been looking in all the wrong fucking places. Tasha...is...delicious. I turn to face Max, my eyes widened, my mouth slack, and a look that tells him give it to me now.

"Don't even think about it fucker." He snorts with humor. "She's way out of your league, shit, Julia is way out of mine."

"No one is out of my league." I deadpan. "Just because your pussy whipped," I add, dropping back down onto the couch and crossing my hands behind my head. "She's definitely a woman that likes to be talked through it, degraded maybe?" I move my hand to tap my chin. "Think she's into anal?"

"Jesus Christ, Rocco," Max exclaims.

"Hey, prison does something to a man."

"First of all, you were in a detention center for 12 hours, and that's not the same as jail." He rolls his eyes, "I doubt you were in there long enough to drop the soap." Hunkering down in the lazy boy chair, Max rests his left ankle on his right knee. "Secondly, she would suck the life out of you and leave you for dead."

"She can definitely suck something. Did you see the ass on her?"

He shakes his head, grinning at my blatant sexualized comment. “You have issues. But look,” Max holds his hands up, “I’m not going to stop you, but when she cuts your throat because of the attitude you give her, don’t come crying to me.”

I growl with excitement. “Fuck, I love an angry chick. They’re always the most fun in bed.”

My eyes flick to the girls, and I watch them walk down the stairs. Then, as I turn to face my cousin, a smile immediately grows on his lips. I’ve never seen him act this way with another woman before, and I swear, she’s done something to him. The moment her eyes connect with his, she makes her way to him before dropping into his lap. His arms circle her middle, and she settles in closer to him.

Fuck, it’s honestly great to see him happy.

It’s been a long time since he’s smiled, and I’m glad she’s there to put it back.

“So,” Tasha sighs, looking at me before smacking my feet, “move, ass.”

Max covers his mouth with his fist, coughing to cover the laugh. Yeah, she’s going to run me through the wringer tonight, that’s for sure.

And goddamn, I can’t wait.

“What’s the plan, killers?” She grins.

“She told you, huh?” Max huffs, squeezing Julia’s stomach, eliciting a yelp from her almost immediately.

Tasha shrugs, “I know I should care, but...I don’t. From what I hear, he was awful and...well, it is what it is. Julia trusts you, so why shouldn’t I. Also,” she turns her

head to face me and screws her face up in disgust, “sound travels in a cabin, asshat. The only way you’re getting your cock sucked is if I remove your ribs and force you to suck it yourself.”

I burst out laughing, sitting up and draping one of my arms over her shoulder. She snickers but doesn’t remove it. “Baby, where the hell have you been all my life?”

“Running...from you.” Tasha scoffs. But by the look on her face, she’s anything but disgusted by me, and I know for a fact that she’s just playing hard to get. But it’s okay, “If there’s one thing I love...it’s the chase of a beautiful woman.”

Tasha rolls her eyes so hard I think she might see her brain. Ignoring my comment, she looks at Max and Julia. Taking my time, I rake my eyes over her, looking at her and committing her entire form to memory. Curvaceous, check. Beautiful smile, check. Funny, double-check.

Bright green eyes that shine like fucking Jade, full pink lips, and a dusting of freckles along her beautifully golden-tanned skin. She’s far from good-looking. Tasha is absolutely stunning and clearly a larger-than-life character in and of herself.

Not to mention her thick red hair that sits in loose waves against her shoulders. Not quite copper but not quite red, it sits somewhere in between, and all I can think about is wrapping my fist around it and dragging her to the floor, ordering her to get on her knees and?—

“Seeing as neither of us are going anywhere as of yet...you got any alcohol? If I’m going to sit with two murderers and my best friend who gave one an alibi...I’m going to need something to relax me cos this...” she points between the three of us, “is weird as all hell.”

I really need to get a grip.

“We stocked up on food and drink for the next few days before I head back to work.”
Julia shrugs.

Heading back to work?

I don't think so, sweetheart.

There's no way Max will allow that.

She clearly has no idea who he is.

“We'll talk about that later.” I hear him say, clearly trying to whisper in her ear but failing miserably.

CHAPTER 26

Tasha

The entire ride up here, I spent envisioning my best friend's body mutilated. Chopped into a million pieces or stabbed—a murder documentary in the making. All I had to go on was a spotty signal leading me to her approximate location. Several times, it showed her as in the fucking lake, which had my heart plummeting thinking she'd drowned. I was ready to murder anyone that got in my way and put that black belt to use. But no. She's fine. Just dicked down and head over heels for this guy.

I have to say, though, I've never seen her look so happy and content. I never thought I'd see that sparkle in her eyes after her mom passed, but every time she looks at Max, there it is. Gleaming away, flickering with happiness. It's almost gag-worthy.

The guy she loves might be a little fucked up, but if he has Julia looking like this? Well, I think I can forgive him.

I chug the bitter beer back in several long gulps, earning me an appraising look from Rocco. It's annoying how hot he is with that eyebrow piercing and tattoos crawling up his well-defined arms. It makes me want to trail the design with my tongue.

Wow, that buzz has gone straight to my head, and I feel light on my feet.

I wipe the dribble that slid down my chin with the back of my hand.

“Let's play a game.”

“What kind of game do you have in mind, sweetheart,” Rocco says, eye fucking the shit out of me. I find myself clenching my thighs together, chasing a semblance of friction.

“First, I’m not your sweetheart. And secondly...” I look around and feel the weight of the empty beer bottle in my hand. I bring it up and, with a wicked smile on my face, point it right at Rocco. “A little spin the bottle.”

“No way, Tash,” Julia says, rolling her eyes.

“What? If you land on me, I promise to make it worth your while.” I wiggle my eyebrows, and she laughs, her head shaking at my antics. She’s known me long enough to understand when I’m not going to let up.

“Come on, what else do we have to do?” They look at each other and shrug their shoulders. That’s when I knew I had them. “Sit!” I say, plopping down, crossing my legs, and smacking the floor with my hand.

They join me on the floor. Sitting in a lopsided circle. Rocco takes a swig of beer, eyes on me. And damn if I don’t feel that heated look all the way to my core.

“Julia, you go first.” She tucks a stray strand of her blonde hair behind her ear and gives the bottle a whirl. It spins fast at first, then wobbles its way over, hitting Max.

“No fair.” Rocco laments, and Max shoots him a glare before grabbing Julia by the back of the neck and kissing her within an inch of her life.

“I’m not going to lie, that was hot. No wonder why you disappeared for the last few days.”

Jules blushes furiously while Max sits there looking smug.

Rocco goes to grab the bottle and then stops. “If it lands on Max, I’m not kissing my cousin.”

I laugh. “Fair. If you get Max, and vice versa, you can have a redo.” I say, waiting for him to spin.

As the bottle turns, a feeling low in my gut twists around, hoping it lands on me. There’s one thing I know about a guy like Rocco. He would know exactly how to find my clit and keep it happy. I’m inclined to let him try, but not before making him work for it first.

The bottle lands on Max, and he groans. He picks up the bottle and spins it again.

This time, it spins all the way around and lands on himself.

“Guess you have to kiss yourself, tough guy.”

“Tough guy?”

“There’s a mirror right over there. Have at it. I’m sure you could use the practice.” I point to the mirror I passed on my way into the cabin. It’s flanked by two large deer heads.

He rolls his eyes and brings his lips to his own tattooed hand, giving it a loud peck. “There, sweetheart . Your turn.”

I snatch the bottle from him and take my turn. The bottle wobbles slowly, landing on Rocco.

He gives me a shit-eating grin.

“Pucker up.” He says tapping his finger to his lips as an invisible string seems to send the corner up into a smirk.

I crawl over to him. His eyes go wide as he watches me. He licks his lips, and my eyes flick down, watching the movement. That’s when I go in for the kill and press my lips to his cheek, but he turns, capturing my lips in his, catching me by surprise.

It’s rough and commanding, tasting faintly of beer. His hand snakes up the back of my head, tilting to deepen the kiss. His teeth graze my bottom lip, and I hear a moan escape my throat.

“Get a room,” Max says, pulling Julia to her feet.

I break the kiss, feeling dazed.

Rocco’s eyes bore into my soul, looking like he’s two seconds away from devouring me.

I rise from the floor and brush off my hands, trying to act like Rocco didn’t just scramble my brain with that kiss. Grabbing a second beer from the fridge, I chug this one back even faster than the first. Chasing that buzz and needing to calm my erratic heartbeat.

Rocco comes up behind me, invading my space.

Jules and Max are nowhere to be found. They are probably up in their room, fucking each other’s brains out. Good for them.

“So, killer, how was jail?”

He smirks. “Why, you wanna know if I like being handcuffed?”

Oh, this motherfucker is cheeky.

“Yeah. So, I can lock you up and leave you hard and wanting more.”

He grabs my hand and brings it down to his crotch with his very hard, very erect dick, letting me feel his entire length.

“Already there, sweetheart. And I’m no killer.”

His dick twitches against my palm, and I run my manicured finger down it. Rocco takes a swig of his beer, Adam’s apple on full display as he swallows, eyes never leaving mine. I bet he’s the kind of guy who loves to eat pussy.

I grip onto his cock and pull him ever so gently towards me. He’s so close that I can feel his breath on my mouth. “I told you. I’m not your fucking sweetheart.” Before I press my lips against his.

All the thoughts I had empty from my head as he pins me against the kitchen counter. My hand works his cock, feeling it grow even harder for me. Goddamn, he’s big.

Before I know what’s happening, I’m lifted off the ground and placed on the top of the counter.

I’m pleasantly surprised by being manhandled by him. We’ve just met, but I’m buzzed enough not to care. He’s hot, and I’m horny. And he has the right equipment to give me exactly what I want—a hot quick fuck.

My hands roam up his chest and wrap around his neck. “Don’t get any wild ideas. This doesn’t mean anything.” I say, kissing him.

His hips dig into my thighs, and I feel his cock pulse against my pussy, and it sends a

jolt of heat skating all over my skin. “Think that all you want. You’ll be begging for more once I’m done with you.”

“Oh, I think you’ll be the one begging,” I say, biting his bottom lip, making him moan so loud that I smirk in satisfaction. I have him right where I want him. Wrapped around me and ready to give me anything I ask for.

CHAPTER 27

Rocco

Fuck me!

I'm not the type of man to talk romantically about women, never have been, never will. But I swear to God, she tastes like honey. Honey , of all this I could say about her...I choose a... never mind... Her heels dig into the back of my thighs, tugging me, begging me to get closer to her.

Her pussy beckoning me like a fucking Siren in vast oceans. I'm six feet, three inches tall, so she's at the perfect height for me on the kitchen counter. I don't have to bend. Shit, I don't even have to hoist her higher. That desperate little cunt of hers, the heat that's coming from it, is begging to be filled.

My groan comes out heavy when she bites my bottom lip, and I feel the skin pop, the metallic taste of blood hitting my tongue as she pulls me back to her, devouring my mouth as equally as I am hers.

Fuck this. I grip the hem of her black leggings and drag them down her frame, pulling them from the edge of her feet and launching them somewhere else in the room. Her arousal has created a wet patch on the fabric of her red thong, and fuck me dead. I didn't think I could get any harder.

"Definitely the most fun girl I've ever met," I smirk, stepping back into her space and grinding my erection at her core.

“You’re not so bad yourself, killer.”

My hand goes for her throat, and I drag her forward. “Didn’t murder anyone, or has your neediness for my cock made you forgetful?”

“Not forgetful,” she fumbles with the buckle on my jeans. “Just desperate.” Yanking the zipper down, she stares into my honey-brown eyes, “Just fuck me already.”

“Oh, I’m going to fuck you,” I thrust her back into the cupboard above the counter, and she mewls. “But it won’t be quick...and it won’t be until I’ve made you come first.”

Releasing her throat, I place both hands underneath her knees, dragging her ass to the edge and pushing her legs back to her chest. She’s drunk, we both are, but not enough for this to be a mistake or consent a mystery. But, just in case.

I look up at her. “How drunk are you?”

“Sober enough to fuck you but drunk enough to say how much I reaaally want to.” She grins. “I get you want to be a gentleman, but be a good boy and make me come.”

Good boy?

Fuck, why is that so hot?

Tasha holds her legs in place, spread wide and to the side of her chest, widening herself for me. So, I take this opportunity to tear the underwear from her pussy. Her beautiful golden skin is on display, and Jesus Christ, this pussy. Glistening with her arousal, swollen and begging to be eaten.

The small patch of curls just above her clit is making me insane. “You want me to

make you come?" I hum, rubbing the middle fingers of my right hand up and down her wet slit, coating my fingers perfectly.

"Yes, but..." she twitches, "it never happens." She chuckles.

"Excuse me?" I freeze, the tips of my fingers pausing at her entrance. "What never happens?"

"I'm the only person who's ever made me come." She laughs then, "Don't worry if you can't, it's not you...it's me."

"Nah," I shake my head. "You'll come...and not just once either, because just by looking at that pretty fucking face," I lean in closer. "I know you're just a needy little cum slut, aren't you?" I grip her jaw, and she nods. "Words, Tasha." I slide both fingers inside her deep, wet core and fight myself not to come at this alone.

"Fffuuck." She mewls, dragging the word out.

I turn my head, "I can't hear you." I slide my fingers back out of her and still.

"Wh-why are you stopping?"

"I. Said. Words." That's when the first crack of my palm against her pussy sounds out, and she yelps.

"What the fuck!"

I spank her again. "Not the words I'm looking for." I press my fingers back into her core, her walls tighten, and I grin at how responsive she is to my touch. Repeating the same action as before, I pull my fingers free and spank her pussy.

“Oh my God!” She huffs, her teeth biting into her bottom lip. She rocks her hips forward, seeking friction.

I snort. “Barely known me a few hours, and your cunt is already chasing my touch.”

Spank.

“Yes.” Her eyes fall to half-mast, and she’s already a writhing mess in front of me.

“Who would’ve known you’re a little pain slut, Tasha.” I grin down at her.

“Not....me.” She answers breathlessly while I pump two fingers inside her a couple of times. Bringing her close to the edge, and the moment she clenches, I stop.

Nobody is going to tell me they have only come by their own hand. Because if that’s the case for her, she’s fucking some stupid men who have no idea about the anatomy of a woman, for one, but also that it’s not the act of sex that makes you come, but the desire and patience you put into it.

The edging, dirty talk, making your partner feel like you want them, and they’re the only fucking person on this planet that gets to have you.

Treat them like a whore and a queen, a pious girl, and a fucking sinner. Worship. Lust. Patience. Most men just want to get in and out, not me. Watching a woman writhe beneath me can make me come hard enough to make me feel like a pre-pubescent teenage boy again.

“This cunt is so fucking saturated. I know you want to come, so,” I pull her jaw down with my thumb and spit directly in her mouth with force. “Say the words I want to hear, or I’ll leave you spread out and needy on this counter. And trust me, no amount of finger fucking yourself will ease the ache of my touch. Tasha say?—”

“Fuck! Alright! Fuck me, make me come, please I’m a desperate fucking cum slut! Please just do something, anything! You stupid fucking?—”

I stuff my fingers back inside her, thumb resting on her beautiful clit, with my left hand pressing down on her stomach. I start off deep, stroking her G-spot, bringing her close, then stopping to play with her clit, repetitively rubbing my thumb back and forth.

“There...there, there!” She chokes.

Her left leg is now draped over my left shoulder, the heel of her right foot propped on the edge of the counter and fanned out to the side.

I keep making the same movement until her moans kick up a notch, and she starts to choke my fingers. A slight sheen of sweat coats her legs.

“Do you know how fucking perfect this cunt is, Tasha? Made to take my fingers, made to take my cock. But I really need you to come...you want to come for me?”

“Fuck...” her eyes widen as I push down on her stomach, working my fingers up and down inside her. The ball of my palm rubs furiously against her clit. “Oh my fucking god what...what the fuck is...”

She stutters, and I grin triumphantly. “Push, bare down for me, don’t hold it, baby.”

“Holy fucking?—”

I have to cup her mouth to muffle the scream of her orgasm as it plummets through her. Her baring down forces my fingers from her core, and a perfect fountain sprays from her pussy, squirting all over the tiles of the kitchen floor.

“That’s my girl.” I tear my cock one-handed from my black denim jeans. Pumping it in my palm a few times before rubbing it through her cum. Spreading it over my shaft.

Her hand curves around the crown of my cock, and I groan. “Shit...condom.” I stare at her, removing my hand.

“I’m on the pill, and I...I got tested last week. You?”

I shrug, “First time without a condom.”

Her eyes round with a look that tells me I just gave her the key to the fucking city. She pumps me in her hand before smiling.

“Fuck my pussy, big boy. Show me what I’ve been missing all these years. Make me come again.”

I don’t waste a single second before I thrust forward with enough force to make us both groan deeply, my abdominal muscles clenching because, goddamn, she feels fucking perfect. I’ve never fucked someone without, and yeah, now I get why people love it so much.

“Fuck, Tasha.”

I’m done. I’m so fucking done with this girl!

CHAPTER 28

Julia

I muffle a laugh, hearing Tasha and Rocco go at it.

“Well, that didn’t take long, did it?” Max says with an easy smile that I haven’t seen since Rocco was arrested. I push my fingers through his dark hair, and he leans into my touch.

We’ve retreated to what I’ve deemed as ‘our bedroom’, relaxing against the birch wood headboard.

“The two of them together is going to be hilarious.”

“Are you kidding? The two of them together is going to be nothing but trouble.” The dark mood that’s been clinging to him is back in full force. A reminder that we’re still not in the clear. Rocco may be out for now, but the cops are suspicious. I can tell Max feels guilty for his cousin taking the blame for something he did. Even if the cops believe my story, they’re looking at the family.

At Max.

At me.

“Hey, where did you go in that pretty little head of yours?” Max asks, hand firmly on my thigh. Holding me like I belong right next to him.

“Today was a lot. I’ve never been in trouble before. I’ve never seen the back of a cop car. When I was a teenager, I never even shoplifted like many of my friends did. I thought for sure they would lock me up, and I’d never see you again.”

He presses his lips to my temple and cradles me against his firm chest.

“That would never happen. If they tried to take you from me, I’d have no problem killing anyone that stood in my way of keeping you.”

Tasha might be teasing Rocco about being a killer, but with Max’s declaration, I’m forced to remember that the real killer is right here. Holding me. While that should cause me to panic, it calms me. Knowing that he cares for me so much that he’s willing to risk everything for me.

This thing between us might be new, but it’s fierce and full of passion. He understands me in ways I didn’t even know I could be. And what’s worse is that I feel the same way about him. Here I am, risking it all for a man I barely know, but I feel deep in my soul that he’s it for me. The mere thought of not being with him anymore sends my anxiety into a tailspin. I’ve already lost so much—my dad, then my mom. It’s been just me and Tasha. But when I met Max, he breathed life into my grief-stricken heart. Lighting my life up, and desperate to hold onto what we have.

“Make me forget, Max. Make me forget everything but you.”

He moves on me in an instant, hovering over my body and running his large hands over my curves.

His lips are on me instantly. He takes my mouth in his, then leaves a trail of hot kisses down my jaw and even lower. He moves over the dip of my breasts. His lips find my pebbled nipple, sucking against the thin fabric of my shirt. The friction of his mouth against the barrier between us has my core aching for more.

“Are you wet for me, Bella ?”

“Yes.” I moan.

His fingers find the button of my jeans, flicking it open and dipping his hand into my pants. I’m so wet that when his fingers graze the soft fabric of my panties, he smirks. I’m so fucking soaked for him, needing the feel of him inside me.

“Please,” I beg.

His index finger traces a circle just outside of my panties, hitting that sensitive bundle of nerves that has my legs quivering. I arch up into his hand, needing more pressure. He teases me.

The clothes between us are too much. I want them off, but he takes his time. Torturing me with languid circles, working my desire into a fit of need.

I can feel how hard Max is against my leg, his hips digging into me, searching for friction as he slides my panties to the side, pressing into me.

“So fucking tight and wet for me, Bella. I never want to stop feeling you wrapped around me.”

The intensity of his words mix with the sincerity in his eyes and I’m so far gone for this guy. It was a chance encounter that changed the entire trajectory of my life. It’s funny how one little decision can mold your future like that. He could have chosen any coffee shop. There are several in the area to choose from. But he walked into the one I worked at, flipping my world upside down with the tilt of his smile and wink of his eye.

I lift my hips and let him strip me bare. First, by peeling off my pants. Then, my

panties. I raise my arms as he tugs my shirt up and over my head, his hands linger on the swell of my breasts. His breath skates over my bare skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

“So fucking responsive to me.” He murmurs, leaving a trail of kisses up my neck, pulling my ear between his teeth. It’s sharp and sensual. His hand finds its way up and around my throat, feeling my erratic heartbeat under the pads of his fingertips. His calloused thumb grazes my jawline, tilting my head to look up into his dark eyes. “So fucking beautiful.”

“I don’t ever want this to end,” I whisper, barely audible enough for either of us to hear. Partly because I’m scared to admit it and partly because I’m scared of what his response will be. But even with how low my voice was, he heard me loud and clear.

Max grabs the back of my neck and forces me to look right at him.

“This thing between us might be fast, but it’s real. I’ve never met anyone that makes me feel so untethered from gravity. You’ve become the force in which I orbit around. The one thing keeping me sane in this mess I’ve created. You understand me and accept me for who I am.”

I swallow hard, feeling the tip of his cock pressing against my slick entrance. His words wash over me and wrap around my heart, taking up residence in my soul.

“Come with me.” He says, pressing into me, filling me up inch by inch.

“Wh-what?” My body instinctually moves with his, feeling him claim my pussy with his pierced, throbbing cock.

“Please.” His lips kiss down the pulsating vein in my neck. “Come with me. To Sicily. Be with me.”

My hands dig into his back, feeling his muscles flex with each thrust. The weight of what he's asking of me meshes with the need to keep him.

"I love you so fucking much, Julia." His thumb comes up and wipes away a tear I didn't know had escaped my eyes. He thrusts into me slowly, wringing pleasure from my body as his words fill my heart with hope.

"I love you too."

His dark eyes flash and a smile takes over that sinful mouth of his.

"Then say yes."

I know in that instant that there is no going back. This will be one of those moments in my life that I will play over and over in my mind, knowing the exact time my life changed with one simple word. "Yes."

His thrusts become more intense as sweat drips from his prominent brow, his smile blinding.

"Oh, Bella, it's a good thing you know I love you because I'm about to fuck you like I don't. Now, hold on."

CHAPTER 29

Maximo

I push inside my girl—all the way to the root of my cock—I don't waste any time being gentle. After hearing those three words come from her mouth, having her reciprocate my feelings with a look on her face that told me it's real, I can't hold back. I fuck her vigorously, without pause, pulling out slowly so she can feel every inch of me stretch her. Before slamming back into her with deviant intent.

She's mine.

Not that I didn't know that before.

But now it's solidified.

“Max!” She cries out.

I cover her mouth with my left hand, pressing my thumb to the underside of her jaw to make sure it's clamped shut. My right arm slides under her right leg, hoisting it up and over my shoulder so I can reach a new angle, allowing me to plow deeper inside her cunt.

“Those moans of yours are mine. Nobody else gets to hear them.” I grunt with every thrust. “So, keep that pretty fucking mouth of yours shut, Bella .”

I watch her eyes roll back and her eyelids flutter closed. My body presses hers deeper

into the mattress, “Uh, uh.” I chuckle, halting my assault on her pussy. “Eyes on me, or I stop.”

Julia’s eyes spring open, focusing back on me. But this position isn’t enough. I need more. Removing my hand from her mouth, I roll her over onto her front with my dick still buried deep inside her, and I pull her up onto all fours.

“Forearms on the mattress,” I demand, and when she gives me exactly what I want, she curves backward, pulling my face to meet hers in a searing kiss.

“Fuck...me...harder.” She stutters with every jolt, every thrust of my cock. With my thighs slapping against her ass, I release everything I have on her, and like the good girl she is, she silences her moans to grunts and heavy breaths.

It doesn’t take long before the lust-filled sounds we are making together fill the room, and I feel my balls begin to tighten. I’ll never get enough of her, never grow tired of this fucking sensational pussy she has.

“I’m close,” I moan in her ear. “You’re gonna come on my cock, Julia. Choke the fucking life out of it.”

“Yes, yes, I’m...Max! I’m coming!” She squeals as I reach round and pinch her clit between my thumb and index finger.

“Good girl,” I hum, “good fucking girl.”

And with three final thrusts, both of us explode with pleasure. Stars dance behind my eyelids as I close them, and enjoy the feel of her coming apart around me.

Pulling out my softening dick, I watch as my cum drips out of her pussy and it fills me with a sense of satisfaction knowing that I can make her go wild for me. But how

far can I push her, I wonder.

“Stay right there, Bella . I’m not done with you yet.”

“I can’t take anymore,” she cries.

“Yes you can. You can take it,” I coax, bending over the bed and pulling out the gun I’d stashed there.

Her eyes go wide. “What the fuck is that?”

“Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. In fact, I think you’ll like what I have planned.”

She scurries back, pressing herself flush against the headboard.

“You trust me, don’t you?” I ask.

Julia nods, but her eyes don’t leave the gun in my hands.

“This is the gun that took that CEO’s life, Julia. With one pull of this trigger, all that suffering he put us through was ended. And he can never hurt anyone ever again.” I run my free hand up her legs, though she’s tense, she lets me. Her wariness apparent. “Spread your legs for me, Bella.”

She does as I ask, and I admire that swollen pink cunt, still slick with our mixed pleasure. “You’re so gorgeous, do you know that?” I place a kiss on the inside of her knee. She trembles beneath me, from fear or pleasure, or both, I don’t know. But I have to do this.

Placing the barrel of the gun between her legs she looks at me with wide eyes, but she doesn’t push me away.

“I trust you,” she says, lifting her chin like a challenge, and fuck me. This is why she has my fucking heart. I slide the gun against her soaked entrance and she inhales sharply, her swollen clit still sensitive from her orgasm. Pushing inside her, she takes the gun between her tight walls and fucks what I give her. Her hips roll on the deadly weapon, knowing that just one mistake could cost her life. But I would never do that to her. I’d turn the gun on myself before I ever harmed her.

I want her to feel the power of having the murder weapon between her legs, bringing her pleasure knowing it killed a man.

She comes hard around the gun, her legs shaking and her mouth parted in a perfect ‘O’. A picture I’ll take with me to my grave.

“Such a good fucking girl, coming for me like that.” Her neck arches as she takes it deeper inside her. I spit directly on her clit and she shudders. “That’s it, Julia. One more. Give me one more. You can do it, Bella .” And she does, erupting so hard around the gun that she digs her nails into my shoulders as she does. I keep a firm pressure on it as she rides out her orgasm, her eyes not leaving mine once. That explicit trust palpable between us.

“That’s my good fucking girl,” I praise, knowing that with her I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my whole fucking life.

“ Pulce, ” I smirk as soon as my friend answers the phone.

“ Stronza. You keep calling me a flea, and I’ll ignore your fucking calls from here on out.”

I bark out a laugh. “You’re too fucking nosey to ignore my calls, asshole. I need a favor.” I can hear his eyes roll through the phone, even though the action doesn’t make a sound.

“Of course you do. What is it?”

“Think you can hack into the no-fly list and remove some names for me?”

He’s silent for a beat, but after a few seconds, I hear the buttons on his keyboard begin to click. “I take it it’s done?”

“Of course.”

“But you got caught?”

“No, they think it was Rocco.”

“Ha!” He guffaws. “That ingrate couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag, let alone kill someone.” I smile at his words before he begins talking again. “Okay, I’m in.”

“I need both Rocco and me taken off, plus two other names.”

“Max,” he sighs. “What did you do? Better yet, who did you do?”

“Julia Canon and Natasha Ryan.”

“Which one?”

“Which one what?”

He snorts, “Which one have you been balls deep in?”

I clear my throat.

“I’m asking because I have both their pictures up on my screen, and damn, they’re fucking hot.”

“Damon, you might be my best friend, but believe me when I say I’ll tear your throat?—”

“Alright,” he begins tapping away. “You need flights?”

“Yes, 4.”

“I can’t believe you’re bringing two women home with you. You know your mother is going to have a field day with this shit, right?”

My mother is going to be over the moon. She’s been hounding me about settling down for as long as I can remember. It will be a surprise, obviously.

“WHAT!”

I hear Tasha shriek from the other side of the cabin and smirk. Julia obviously told her what’s happening. We weren’t leaving Tasha here. Rocco wouldn’t allow it. The man’s got it bad after just one fuck. I can’t say I blame him.

“Max!” Tasha calls from behind me, and I spin on my heel to face her. “You better explain your?—”

I hold up my finger, hushing her as Damon begins to speak. “Alright, so I got you cleared from the system, but it won’t take the cops long to realize all four of your names are gone. So, I suggest you get your shit and get to LaGuardia as soon as possible. The tickets will be waiting for the four of you at the front desk. Ask for Maria,” he clears his throat, “she’ll be expecting you.”

“Alright, thanks. I owe you.”

“You owe me a fucking shit load, and when you’re back in Sicily, I’m claiming the IOUs.”

I don’t get a chance before the line goes dead. Being indebted to one of my longest-standing friends isn’t the worst thing that could happen. Pocketing my phone, I take a seat on the couch. Tasha has her arms crossed, glaring at me with narrowed eyes. Julia stands beside her, desperately trying to hide the smirk written all over her beautiful face.

“What was it you wanted to talk about, Tasha?”

CHAPTER 30

Tasha

“You expect us to just drop everything for you two? I don’t care how fucked down you think we are, that’s a big ask.”

My heart is racing almost as fast as my thoughts. Max shrugs, and Rocco leans against the counter with his arms crossed. Images of what we did right in that very spot flit through my mind and my cheeks heat with the memory. That man knows what he’s doing. I’ll give him that. We fucked all night long, so much so that my legs are hardly holding me up. I always thought there was something wrong with me because of all the times I’ve been with someone, they could never get me off. But being with Rocco was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. He found a way to connect with me that I’ve been searching for my entire life.

But leaving everything behind? Everything I’ve worked for?

It’s insanity.

I look over at my best friend, expecting her to back me up, but her eyes shine with something I haven’t seen in years. It’s the one thing that gives me pause in my panic. She looks content and happy. Emotions that I’ve desperately wanted her to experience again. No matter how many fun girls’ nights the two of us had, she’s been a ghost of her former self. Her smiles were forced and few and never reached her eyes. She was just going through the motions.

“Julia? It’s crazy, right?”

She tucks her hair behind her ear and chews on her bottom lip. “I love him, Tash. Regardless of what you decide, I’m leaving. But I want you with me.”

I look over at Rocco, trying to decipher what he could possibly be thinking.

It’s only been one night.

One amazing, life-changing, orgasmic night.

“If we do this, there’s no way we can come back. Ever. Julia, are you sure?”

“You’re the only thing keeping me here, Tash. My family is gone, and it’s not like we were exactly happy here. I’m sure.” Her hand grips Max’s, and I watch her melt against his touch.

She’s right.

I’ve gotten good at putting on a brave face and hiding my pain. Not wanting to burden her with my problems, knowing how hard she’s had it these last few years. But she can tell anyway. She knows me better than anyone. Julia is my family—a chosen sister who has been with me through thick and thin. As hard as I’ve worked to carve out a life for myself here, I have nothing but an apartment full of emptiness to show for it.

The decision hits deep in my bones as I look around this room taking in the faces of Max, Rocco, and Julia. I’ve always been one to follow my intuition, and I can feel this is one of those times where it’s nudging me to go for what seems outrageous.

“Okay. What’s the plan?”

Julia's face breaks out into the widest smile, squealing loudly in my ear. She throws her arms around my neck with so much force that I almost topple over.

Her happiness is infectious, and I find myself sharing in her joy. Oh God, this is really happening.

Rocco's face has a hint of a smile as he watches the two of us. His eyes alight with the promise of more. More time to figure out what this thing between us is.

"We know that the cops are looking at our family. If they dig any further, they're going to come up with the evidence they need to put us away. So we leave. Today. I'll drive us back to the city for you to grab what you need, and then we'll go to the airport and hope like hell my buddy was able to work his magic." Max says, sounding confident.

"And your buddy?"

"The best hacker in the business. He went to MIT and worked for national security. If he says it's good to go, I trust him."

The question is, do I trust him at his word?

I blow out a breath, nerves settling in my stomach for what we're about to do.

"Okay. Let's go."

Julia shakes my shoulders. "We're going to Italy! Just like we always wanted!"

I laugh, and my eyes slide over to Rocco's smiling face. "We're going to Italy."

CHAPTER 31

Julia

The ride back to our apartments is full of Rocco and Max filling us in on what to expect once we get to Sicily.

“There are so many places I can’t wait to show you, Bella. And the food. You haven’t lived until you’ve tried the food.”

I sit up in the front of the car, hand tucked against Max’s thigh.

“Okay, but how worried do I need to be about Mt. Etna?” Tasha asks from the back.

“Nah, that volcano has been there forever. Sicily is strong. Besides, they’ve been prepping the surrounding areas on how to evacuate for the past few years. If we need to, we have some family with property in Tuscany that we can relocate to.” Rocco answers, pulling her against his side and rubbing her neck and shoulders.

Having Tasha agree to this hair-brained idea is making this all so much easier for me. The thought of leaving her was the one thing that gave me pause about going. Tasha and I have been through so much together that had she not agreed to come, I might not have gone through with it.

When we pull up to my apartment, we agree to meet back in an hour as they drop off Tasha at her place a few blocks over. I pass a black SUV with tinted windows before entering the vestibule of my apartment.

Opening my door, I stand there for a moment, taking in the space—the Christmas lights flickering across the small square footage, the minuscule kitchen area, and the bed smooshed against the wall. I realize now how I’ve just been existing all this time. Trying and failing to make the best of my situation. Working myself to death and hardly making a dent in the amount of bills I have to pay. Getting sick in America shouldn’t result in being unable to afford basic necessities.

My luggage is stuffed with clothes, photo albums, and beauty essentials.

It’s funny how nothing immediately comes to mind when faced with the decision of what to take. I begin to grab the most random items, trinkets that have followed me all my life.

I’m just finishing up when Max shows up.

“You ready?”

“Yeah, just about.”

I take one long look around my studio apartment before closing the door. It feels like I’m closing the door on that chapter of my life as I step into the unknown. My life might have been in shambles, but it was predictable. Now, I don’t know what to expect. And that knowledge thrills me.

Max throws my suitcase into the back, and we peel away, the four of us eerily quiet as the reality of what we’re about to do settles over us.

Faint Christmas songs filter through the car speakers as we drive into traffic. I check the mirror, busying myself with something to distract me from the nervousness that’s settled in my stomach. As I do, a flicker of motion catches my attention. I stare at it for a moment, trying to make sense of what I’m seeing.

“Is that SUV following us?” I ask, noting the black SUV with tinted windows I saw earlier sitting outside my apartment. Oh God, what if they’re onto us?

“Which one?” Max asks, checking the review mirror.

“The black one. Tinted windows. I think I saw the same SUV sitting outside my apartment.”

“Shit.”

Once we’re able to move, Max merges into the next lane.

Sure enough, the black SUV does the same a few moments later.

This is not good.

Max catches my eyes, and a million unspoken words are said with that one look.

“Fuck, okay, hold on.” Max spots an opening at the next exit and takes it, revving the engine to get down the ramp.

The black SUV takes the same turn and my anxiety spikes. Max makes a sharp left turn onto a one-way street, dodging the cars coming directly at us. I grip onto the ‘oh shit’ bar like it’ll save me from an impending crash.

“Look out!” Tasha screams from the back as a U-Haul truck comes barreling towards us with nowhere to go. Oh God, is this how I go? I brace myself for impact, eyes shut and arms up.

Our car suddenly swerves, and I peek through my lashes, finding that we’ve turned into an alley that I didn’t see at the last minute.

Fuck, that was too close.

My heart feels lodged in my throat, and my stomach is churning like I'm about to throw up. I glance behind us to see if the SUV is still coming after us.

"Tasha, Jules, you need to get rid of your phones. They could have tapped into your location and be following the signal." Max says, turning down another road.

I quietly dig my phone out of my purse and turn it off, hands shaking.

"Here, I have a burner for you both," Rocco says, reaching into a bag stowed by his feet. He hands me a sleek black flip phone that looks like it was made in the early 2000s. When I open it up, there's a dim gray background. The buttons light up with a neon green. It's the kind of phone that you need to hit the numbers in order to send out a text.

I swallow hard. This is my life now.

On the run with the man I love.

At the light, Tasha and I toss our phones out the window. We listen to the satisfying crunch of them shattering as we pull away—our old lives severed completely. There's no going back now.

CHAPTER 32

Maximo

Everything comes down to this.

The months of planning so I could exact revenge on the man who ruined countless lives. And what do I have to show for it? A woman who didn't have to trust me but does. Someone I fell for in the unlikeliest of situations, a soul that matches mine.

Julia.

She wasn't supposed to happen but fuck me, I am so glad that she did. Rocco walks with his hand around Tasha's shoulder, smirking down at her before whispering something inaudible into her ear. Rolling her eyes, she swats his chest. Rocco drops his head back and releases a heavy laugh that echoes through the airport. I can't believe we made it here in one piece.

Catching my eye-line, I nod at him, and without pause, he leads Tasha away from Julia and me.

"Wait, what's—" Julia protests, but I stop her. Pulling her hand—that's clasped tightly in mine—to my lips and kissing the back of her knuckles.

"Bella," I hum, "I need you to trust me."

Lifting her free hand to cup my cheek, she searches my eyes. "I do."

“The four of us remaining separate makes it less likely for us to be noticed. We are off the no-fly list, but we can’t be too sure about anything else.”

“I don’t?—”

“When we step through security, I need you to be eight to ten people in front of me. Keep your head down, and no matter what happens...” I pull her close to me, dipping my lips to the shell of my ear. “Whatever you hear, ignore it. Do you hear me? You ignore it, and you walk away. You get on that plane and fly to Sicily without me. There will be someone at the other end.”

“N-no, Max, no, I won’t?—”

“Baby, please.” I cup her cheek, leaning back slightly. “Promise me. I’m not saying it will, but I need to know that whatever happens to me, you’re safe. Rocco will be saying the same thing to Tasha by now. Say it. I want to hear you say that you’ll do it.”

Julia swallows thickly before giving me a controlled and brief nod. “I promise, I-I’ll leave you behind.”

“Good girl.” I smile. Pressing my lips to hers in an owning kiss, marking her as mine for one final time before we move past the point of no return.

I don’t care about myself. I fulfilled my plan, but she was never part of it. So, all I care about now is keeping her safe. Nothing else matters. I knew what I was getting myself into, as did Rocco when we decided to do this. We chose to kill a man who had damaged the lives of millions across America. We made our choice.

I place my hand on the small of her back and gently thrust her forward. The pain and fear in her eyes gut me from the inside out, but I can’t afford to let her see that for

once, I'm just as afraid. Not for me getting caught, but the thought of never holding her in my arms again, not being able to build a life with her.

If we make it through this...I'll spend the rest of my time on earth showing her that she made the right decision coming with me.

I'll never allow her to have that look on her face again.

Bag checks and security ran so fucking smoothly. The little voice in the back of my head convinced me that something would go wrong. Rocco, the girls, and I move down the line and toward the entrance of the plane with our passports and tickets in hand.

"Hello, welcome to Virgin Flights." The stewardess greets us. Taking our tickets, she checks the names before pausing. "Max," she smiles, "would the four of you like to follow me."

"What's going on?" Tasha asks behind me.

"I'm not sure." I shrug.

The four of us walk through the aisles of other fliers all the way to the front of the plane and right into first-class seating.

"These will be your seats for the?—"

"There must be some mistake," I protest softly.

The stewardess grins, taking a step closer to lower her voice. "Damon asked me to relay a message. Now you owe him big time." She smirks, and I return the expression. "He informed me of what you did for those of us who couldn't." Taking a

card from her pocket, she hands it to me. “My brother lost his life last year. So, if you need anything in the future, any of you,” she looks at the four of us, “call that number, and The Missionaries will extract you.” Stepping back, she plants another smile on her face. “Enjoy your flight on Virgin Flights. Drinks and food will be served soon.”

She squeezes between us and goes about her job.

“What the fuck was that about?” Rocco steps up.

“Damon got in contact with The Missionary.” I chuckle. “At this rate, I’ll owe him my first-born son.”

“Slippery fucker.” Rocco snorts.

We place our bags in the overhead compartments and settle into our first-class seats. Tasha and Rocco have a cubicle to themselves, while my girl and I have the same a few seats away. Both of us buckle in, and I’ll never grow tired of seeing the grin on Julia’s face.

Turning to face me, she leans forward, placing a kiss on my cheek. “We did it.”

“We did it,” I repeat.

“And just so you know, Damon is not getting our first-born son.” She pokes my chest playfully.

Pulling her closer to me, I wrap my arms around her, breathing her lemon and sandalwood scent into my nostrils. “You want babies with me, Bella ?”

“I want whatever we can get.”

And that right there, tells me all I need to know.

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SIX MONTHS LATER

Rocco's picture is notorious. It's plastered all over social media, and people wonder what happened to their hero and why he mysteriously disappeared. They're calling him the People's Vengeance—their masked Vigilante.

There are even some groups dedicated to thirsting over him, which Tasha claims to have gone straight to his already inflated ego.

The murder started a chain reaction in the people, calling for reform. While there's massive pushback, it's a start. A change in the system that's failing millions.

Naturally, we've all had to alter our appearance while being in hiding. Rocco took out his eyebrow piercing and shaved his head. Max's signature dark locks have been cut and dyed to a reddish hue, and Tasha and I have matching dark Brunette hair that masks our foreign origins. My hair was cut to my shoulders, which was the perfect choice for the summer heat.

As we walk through the piazza, Mt. Etna's glowing lava sputters into the air in the distance. My Italian is terrible, but I'm learning.

Max's hand firmly holds mine as we amble together while Rocco and Tasha follow behind, elbows interlocked.

The air smells of fresh spices from the open market right around the corner. We're lost in a sea of tourists and locals as they weave in and out of the street. Some stopping right in front of us to take pictures.

At least everyone is too busy to notice us hiding in plain sight.

We take our haul of fresh groceries back to the two-bedroom house we're sharing that's perched above the water. The view is breathtaking, spanning over the sparkling water dotted with yachts and fishing boats. You can feel the history here, and there's a palpable energy of happiness amongst the people, making it easy to lose yourself.

Max and Rocco have been showing us all their favorite sights, even taking us up to Rome and then Venice for a weekend.

I thought leaving my life behind would be hard, but this proves to be anything but. In fact, having Max makes it easy. And with my best friend nearby, we're living our best life. A life I had never even dreamed of having, but now I wouldn't trade it for the world.

"I don't think I'll ever get over how beautiful this view is," I say as Max snakes his hands around my middle.

"Me either." But he isn't looking out the window. He's looking at me.

My stomach clenches, and my core heats as his hands run up my sides and cup my breasts. He teases my nipples through my black maxi dress, and I arch into him, feeling his hard length pressing against my ass. My head rolls back onto his shoulder as he continues to touch me. His mouth finds that sensitive place on my neck that makes my toes curl and goosebumps rise on my tanned skin. A moan escapes my throat as he twists my erect nipples.

"I love those sounds you make, Bella . But you moan loud enough for the neighbors to hear, and I'll have to tape that pretty mouth shut. You remember who those moans belong to, yes?"

"You'll have to remind me," I say, wiggling my ass on his cock. I love how

possessive he is of me. His hand works its way up my throat.

“I dare you to scream.” His pressure tightens around my neck, and my pulse beats wildly against his palm.

His free hand hikes up my dress, exposing my bare underside.

“Fuck. Were you walking around all day like this?”

I nod. “Mmhm.”

“Jesus, Jules. You’re so fucking wet for me.” His fingers dip against my slick entrance, and another moan slips out from my mouth. He yanks his fingers out, and a swift smack hits my wet pussy, making me yelp in surprise.

He turns me around and covers my mouth with his large hand. I stick out my tongue and lick his palm, making him smile in that devious way that I love. The one that lets me know that he’s about to rock my fucking world.

One minute, I’m staring directly into Max’s dark eyes, and the next, I’m yanked over his shoulder and tossed onto the bed. Dress tangled around my waist, exposing me to him.

A dangerous glint sparkles in his eyes as he undresses in front of me. Those abs of his mesmerize me, and I find myself licking my lips in anticipation, feeling the need to have him fill me with his pierced cock. He shrugs out of his shorts and his thick length bobs, looking heavy.

He crawls over the bed, gripping my mouth with his hands and feeding his round tip in.

“This ought to quiet those moans of yours, Bella. Now suck.”

His piercings slide against my tongue as I take him in, feeling him fill me up. My eyes water as he hits the back of my throat, but I don't fight it. I relax my jaw and let him fuck my mouth, lapping up his salty taste.

"Fuck, you take me so good, baby." He presses into me, barbells running over my lips and tongue. His cock pulsates, and his left-hand grips around my neck, squeezing enough on the sides that I start to see stars. My fingers dig into his thighs, and my eyelashes flutter along my cheeks as I gasp around his thick, punishing cock.

He pulls out suddenly, and I breathe in, desperate for the oxygen.

Max kisses down my body, knocking my knees open with his thigh. He finds my entrance drenched and ready for him as he nudges his wet tip against me.

"Now be a good girl for me and watch as I fill your tight cunt up with my cock."

I do as he says, watching as he presses in, inch by inch.

Sweat drips down from his brow, splashing onto my breast and meeting with my own bead of sweat.

Max's hips swivel, pressing his cock into me even deeper, and my mouth drops open.

I'll never tire of this. Of us.

This life we've carved out together is pure bliss.

"Come for me, Bella . Come all over my cock."

I can feel myself clenching around him. Squeezing his dick as he fucks me hard and fast. His balls slap against my pussy, and I can feel the embers of my orgasm beginning to form.

He lifts my leg and places it on top of his shoulder, hitting even deeper inside of me.

I shatter completely, my body shaking as explosions of pleasure lick up and down my spine. My core heats as he releases a hot stream of cum inside of me.

He sets my leg down and presses a kiss to my lips.

“You and me for always, my Bella. ”

Our life might be filled with uncertainty. Anyone might recognize us. It’s a risk we take knowingly, but it’s worth it. To have this. To have us together.

“For always,” I say, kissing him with everything I have.

I can feel him starting to harden inside of me, his cum leaking out from the sides. He lazily moves in and out of me, and I’d make the same decision all over again just to have this moment.

His lips move against mine, and I taste our sin on his lips.

He might be a killer, a wanted man, and a vigilante. But most importantly, he’s mine. And that’s all that matters.

The End