



# Vow of Obsession (A New Reign #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She floats at my periphery, sweet and innocent, nothing like the life I'm accustomed to. I can't help but watch her, follow her, love her from afar. Even though I know I shouldn't.

But to keep her safe, I'll make her my wife, regardless of whether she wants it or not. Our marriage may be arranged, but my ring on her finger will serve as protection from this dangerous life.

I already know my path, and it's a dark one. The family reign that I'm to take over will always be dangerous. But the closer I get to Tova the more I realize she's the only light to the darkness that cloaks me.

Watching her may have been my initial plan, but loving her is now why I live. The only thing is, I'd give my life for my family but I won't give hers.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

## Chapter One

### TOVA

“Marks,” I warn in a low whisper. Don't die, don't die, I chant over and over in my head.

“I'm cracked, but I'll make it.” Crap. I'm not sure I believe that, but I keep my mouth shut. If anyone can, she can, though. “I'm going in.” I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't say that's a terrible idea because what the hell do I know? I'm dead!

“Heal off!” I warn again.

“Not this time, motherfucker.” Marks' voice is filled with glee before two quick shots strike the target.

The body drops. “I'm a big clip that!” Marks shouts, making me pull my headset away from my ear for a second.

“Get rekt.” Marks lets out an evil laugh that has me letting out a small one. “Take your L.”

I think Marks enjoys shit-talking more than playing the game. I'm not a giant fan of the game, but she always talks me into playing with her. She carries me. I don't know why I ever doubted her. The girl is a killer shot, hence the nickname Marks. She never misses her mark.

A knock sounds at my door a few seconds before it opens partially, my dad poking his head in. I pull my headphones off.

“Can your mom and I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He gives me a nod; his mouth forms a tight line, making me think something is wrong. I slip my headset back on.

“My parents want to talk. I’ll hit you up later?”

“I’ll be here,” Marks singsongs as I flip off my PlayStation.

Marks and I have been friends for a few years now. We met in an online book club. Both of us loved the same books, so we were always recommending ones to each other. Our friendship blossomed from there. We can be so opposite at times but also the same.

I place my headset on the dresser before pulling on a sweater.

Dread forms in my stomach because this isn’t normal.

If Mom or Dad wanted to talk to me about anything or let me know something, they’d simply come into my room and sit down.

The fact that they asked me to come and talk to both of them means this is bigger than normal.

Our talks like this seem to always be connected to the Marino family. The first time my parents ever had a conversation this serious with me was when I was in high school. That time I’d been informed that we were moving. So I’m guessing this is something of that magnitude.

No one wants to hear that they are moving in the middle of high school, but it turned out better than I expected.

We moved out of our small apartment into a cute home on the Marino estate, but everyone refers to this place as “the farm”.

It does have a farmy feel to it with all the land around us, but we’re not far from the city.

There are a handful of small houses on the farm, a few barns, and sheds.

Then there is the main house, which is massive.

That is where the Marino family stays when they are in town.

Mr. and Mrs. Marino used to stay here more often, but over the past couple of years have traveled more and spent a lot of time in Europe.

They have four adult children. Three are men, and the other is a daughter about my age, but she is also never around much; she’s mostly off at school. It’s the three brothers that are most often here. War being the oldest of them.

He is in charge, slowly taking over for his father.

That’s the vibe I get, anyway, and vibes are all you can get when it comes to them because you’re not supposed to ask.

Hell, you shouldn’t even be paying attention.

Mind your own business is the motto around here when it comes to the Marinos.

That was instilled in me from the start by my parents.

It didn't take long for me to put together that the Marino family might not live by the letter of the law.

Which means my dad must not either. He does, after all, work for them.

Our lives have shifted dramatically since we came to live on the farm.

Mostly for the good. We no longer go without, and there is no more counting every penny.

When I enter the living room, my mom and dad are on the couch, my mom whisper-yelling at my dad. She cuts off when she sees me, giving me a warm smile. This must be bad. It's not often, if ever, that I see them fight.

I'm guessing this isn't about the trip I asked to take the other day. I want to go visit Marks. There is no way I could ask if she could visit here. Everyone has to pass through the gate to enter the farm. This place is a fortress. Let's just say the Marinos don't like strangers coming and going.

"What's going on?" I brush one of my unruly curls out of my face.

My mom stands, coming over to me. The only thing my mom and I have in common when it comes to appearance is that we're both short. My mom is on the tiny side all around with blond, straight, short hair. She presses a kiss to my cheek.

"Have a seat, sweetheart." Oh God. That feeling of uneasiness I had ramps up even more. I almost feel sick with nerves.

"Is one of you dying?!" I blurt out. Mom's eyes soften.

“No, not today,” she reassures me, so I go and sit down on the loveseat.

“This isn’t about me going to see Marks either, is it?”

“No, honey,” my dad says with a small sigh. “This is about War.”

“Is he okay?” I almost come out of my seat, but I manage to keep it together. The first time I ever saw War, I’d fallen right on my ass. Literally, I tripped over my own stupid feet.

His real name is Warren, but everyone calls him War.

He’s an impossible man to miss. He easily towers over most people with a broad, thick frame.

I know he has at least a foot on me. That’s not saying much.

I’m barely five foot five. But what stands out to me the most about him is his striking blue eyes.

They are such a contrast to his inky black hair, olive skin, and all-black suits that fit like they were tailored specifically for him, which I’m sure they are.

Then there are the tattoos. I can’t even get started on those and how they peek out the top of his buttoned-up shirt, wrap around his neck, and show when he rolls his sleeves up.

There have been many nights I’ve dreamed about seeing the rest of them.

What it would be like to trace my fingers along them.

"He's fine," my dad says, but his tone is off. Does he not want him to be okay?

I'm guessing my crush on War was easy for my parents to spot. I'd still been a teen, so I must have been easy to read. My dad had told me to stay away from War, that he wasn't someone I should try to befriend or get close to. Plus, there was his age. He was at least ten years older than me.

It wasn't difficult to do as my dad told me.

War didn't linger when I was in the main house.

If I even said hi to him, I'd only get a grunt of a response.

Every now and then, he'd cut me with a glare, but there had been a couple of times I thought he was watching me. I swear I felt his eyes on me, but he always kept his distance. There's a high likelihood I imagined him paying attention to me because of the crazy crush I had on him.

"We owe the Marino family," my mom says.

"Like money?" A pit forms in my stomach. I ball my hands into fists in my lap. There have been a few times I saw some bloody men being dragged from the main house. I ducked my head and never spoke of it.

"No," my dad responds, my mom shaking her head.

"I'm truly sorry, sweetheart." That warm smile my mom gave me when I entered the room has faded away. I wish they would get to the point already. Waiting for them to spring whatever news they have on me is like torture.

"I didn't know this is what would have been asked of me." Dad closes his eyes as if

in pain. I have never seen him this way. My dad is a big guy that can handle himself. I recall when I was younger, he'd work late nights as security at bars.

"Dad," I press. "Tell me. You're freaking me out."

"This isn't how I thought this would go." Mom's shoulders drop.

"The Marinos have come to collect the debt I owe them," my dad finally says. "They have requested your hand in marriage to War." I stare at my dad, not sure I heard him correctly. Did he just say I'm expected to marry War?

"Requested. Really?" My mom pops up from her chair. "I doubt that was a request, Corbin." She starts to pace back and forth.

"You want me to marry War?" I ask out loud, more to myself and also in confusion. I reach down to pinch my arm to make sure I'm not dreaming. Nope. I'm wide awake.

"Do I want that? No," my dad responds. Right, I was supposed to stay away from him.

"Can't it be one of the other brothers?" Mom turns back to face Dad. "Z or Ronan." I don't want to marry Z or Ronan. Both my parents glance over at me for a second. If I had to pick between the two of them, though, I'd choose Ronan.

"I asked." My dad's tone is defeated. I unclench my hands, fighting a smile that wants to take over. They are miserable over this, and I want to jump up and do one of those victory dances Marks does on the corpses of the people she kills in-game. My parents are acting like this is a nightmare situation for me, but to me it's my very own fairy tale come true.

"When?" I ask, hoping it's sooner rather than later.



This is insane. I've found myself transported to a realm where arranged marriages exist, yet it doesn't seem that far-fetched. I remember War's sister once discussing the possibility of having an arranged marriage in the future, similar to how her parents were married.

That wasn't the world I knew, but then again, my whole world has changed since I came to live here. I guess I'm a part of this world too... now, so it seems, more than ever.

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### Chapter Two

#### WARREN

“What are you doing here?” I don’t bother glancing up from my computer as my brother enters my office with not even a knock. This is why I often go into one of my offices outside of our family home. That way I can’t be bothered with every small thing.

Except things have been changing, and everyone is always away now, especially our parents.

I have been slowly slipping into the role of taking over the family business from my father.

The more I take over, the more my father and I bump up against each other, not seeing eye to eye on everything. It’s been rocky, to say the least.

“Dad told me to be here.” I pause, pulling my attention away from the screen and the last numbers or the hit we’re going to take, but some hits are worth the price in the end.

“Did he now?” Interesting. What is the old man up to? There’s never a dull day when it comes to my father. Always has something up his sleeve. Sometimes good and others not so good. It’s a flip of a coin on what today will bring.

"Something about a meeting." Yes, I do have a meeting set with my father, but I'm

starting to think it's not going to be a call. "Do you know what it's about? He said I needed to be here and change is happening." My brother Ronan shrugs.

"I suppose we'll be finding out together." I assumed it was a typical check-in. You know what they say about assuming.

Lately, my father has been giving me room to stretch and get a solid footing without him having a remark about everything.

We agree on many things but not everything.

Especially with the new direction I want to take our family business.

It's time. Things have changed, and my father hasn't been the best at adapting to those changes.

"This couldn't be an email?" My youngest brother Z strolls into my office next. Fucking hell, it must be serious if he also asked Z to be here for this.

"Is Cosima going to show up next?" Our little sister is tucked away at college in Europe. That was part of the reason our parents have been staying in Europe more lately. It was either there or at the condo they bought in the city. Both Zero and Ronan keep a place in the city as well.

"Not today." Zero drops down into one of the chairs in front of my desk. Ronan stays standing.

"Maybe he's fully handing things over. He might as well at this point." Ronan says.

Ronan has no interest in taking over. He doesn't want to be involved in all the ins and outs of business. He's more of a hands-on type.

"Everyone is here," my father says, entering my office. I stand.

"Where is Mom?" I ask.

"She is busy."

"Busy?" I ask, wondering what the hell he is talking about.

"We'll get to that." I sit back down in my chair. Father walks over to the bar, pouring himself a finger of scotch. I bet I'm going to need one myself.

None of us speak. We wait for him to tell us why he's here and what is going on.

"You want to take over," Dad finally starts, taking a seat on the couch, stretching his legs out.

"That's why you're here?" I'm not one for small talk or to drag things out. There is no need to pussyfoot around this. I have other things I could be doing right now.

"We haven't been seeing eye to eye on things."

"That may be so, but if you want me to take over your operation and businesses, then this is how it will be." Ronan shifts on his feet, and I don't miss Z sitting up straighter.

"You know I want you to take over, but I think there are a few flaws in your plan of going legit."

"We'll never be legit." He knows that. We all do. Order still has to be kept in the streets. It's the way of things. If it's not us, it will be someone else that maintains it.

“Yes, but you’re rubbing shoulders with senators, and I believe I heard you had dinner with the chief of police.”

“You have someone watching me? Reporting back?” I can confirm with certainty that it is not one of my brothers.

"I always know what's happening in this city."

"I'm going to?—"

"Listen," Father snaps, cutting me off. There are not many men that would dare speak to me in that tone. I lean back in my chair. We might be at odds when it comes to business, but I still have respect for him, so I do as he says and keep my mouth closed. “I’m not opposed to cleaning things up. I did the same when I took over, but let's face it, some people won’t want to do their legit businesses with us because of our last name alone.”

“I know,” I agree.

One of our biggest avenues are the docks.

We control almost all of the docks in the city that can be privately owned, rather than those owned by the government.

We are cutting ties with some of the importers we used to let use them; I need new ones.

This is something Z and I have been going around and around about.

“You’re also not very charming,” my father tosses out.

“Charming.”

“Yes, charming. People have to somewhat like you. Feel like you’re really cleaning things up in order to want to do business with you. If you want legitimate business, that is.”

“And how do you want me to go about that?”

“That’s easy. You’ll get married.” It takes everything in me not to give a reaction. Ronan’s brows lift while Z lets out a low whistle. I expected my father to have a solution, but never could I have imagined that marriage would be it.

“War here getting married?” Z shakes his head. “Who’d want to marry this asshole?” He says it with a smile, but he’s not wrong. I’m not winning any awards for my personality. Actually, people tend to try to stay away from me as much as possible. Unless they need something.

I can’t wait to hear how the hell the old man plans on finding me a wife.

He has to know that the girl’s fate wouldn’t be a favorable one.

I’ll never love or care for her. I’m honestly not sure if I love my own family.

I have loyalty to them, but I have never been one for emotions.

I do know I care about them. However, I firmly believe that I could never love this woman.

“I already have someone in mind, and they have agreed,” our father informs us. Of course he does.

Now I have an idea where my mother is. If there is a wedding coming up, she is likely all over it. My fingers itch to pull at the collar of my shirt.

“An arranged marriage, really?” My parents had an arranged marriage, and my sister is under the assumption the same will happen to her.

At least that’s what she confessed to me one night in tears. I told her to let me worry about that. It might have worked out for our parents, but that’s not the case for everyone else.

"Do you plan to ever marry?"

"No." Without a doubt, that would put a target on the woman. I wouldn't do that. I might be cleaning things up, but we still firmly operate in the gray, playing in both worlds.

“See? Then what does it matter who you marry?” I know what he’s getting at. I could stick her somewhere and ignore the woman, but I’m sure kids are on the top of that list for my father with this plan. He wants to have a more family appeal.

“No.” I shake my head.

“I’m not asking. You will marry Tova Sullivan.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Three

#### TOVA

My parents are more upset by this news than I am. I try to reassure them that everything is fine and they haven't ruined my life. I want to ask what they owe the Marino family, but it's been so ingrained into me about not asking questions about the Marinos that I don't.

"I'm going to check on the garden." I tend to the main garden on the farm. There is a lot of land here, but the garden has always been mine to oversee. There is a groundsman, but at some point, the responsibility of that area was handed over to me. It is one of my favorite places here.

"Okay." Mom gives me a hug so tight I can barely breathe. "Don't be out too late." Dad tugs Mom to him, wrapping an arm around her.

He kisses the top of her head, whispering to her. Neither of us is good with her being upset. If anyone can calm her down, it's him, but I can't help but get a sense there is something deeper they aren't telling me.

I walk my normal path toward the garden, knowing what my intentions really are.

I cut flowers all the time and put them inside the main house in different vases.

Normally, I try to get a peek of War. That was always the hope.



Today I have a different plan. I want to speak to him.

That isn't out of line, is it? We're to be married, after all.

Anticipation courses through me at the thought of executing my plan.

Will I get more than a grunt or a few words from War today?

Is he even on board with this whole plan?

I can't see anyone forcing him to do anything.

So many thoughts run through my mind. It will be good for me to get in the garden.

It always helps calm me. Even though I don't plan on staying there long.

Today the daffodils in full bloom catch my attention. The bright yellow makes them stand out. It brings a smile to my face. I cut a handful before I head toward the main house, my mind wandering. If I am to be married to War, would I be able to put them into vases and set one in his office?

Normally I leave them in the kitchen, and people grab them and set them where they want.

I wasn't sure if it was the housekeeper who did that or if the Marinos did it themselves.

The kitchen is empty when I enter from the patio door.

It's not surprising. A lot of the family has been gone lately, but I have noticed War is home more often now.

I find a more masculine white vase to put the flowers into. I can do this. I give myself a small pep talk before making my way toward War's office. One of the double doors is partly open.

I pause right outside of the room when I hear my name said. It doesn't take me long to figure out who is inside the office. All of the men are here and talking about me. I should turn and leave. It's rude to linger and listen, but my feet stay firmly planted.

"Tova Sullivan? You want me to marry Tova. The flower girl," I hear War say. I'd know his voice anywhere. My hold on the vase in my hands tightens. There is no missing that he's not a fan of me. That's all he sees me as? The flower girl?

Ouch.

"She's perfect for this. Ideal, really," War's father, Dario, says.

"Perfect?" War's tone suggests he begs to differ.

"Why isn't she perfect? You can stash her off somewhere and live your life. After you put a baby inside her." My stomach drops at the way they are speaking about me.

"She's cute," Z says. "Except for the strange clothes." What the heck? I make a lot of my clothes or change the ones I buy.

"Shut the fuck up," War barks so loudly that I take a step back. Not that anyone can see me.

"Enough," Dario snaps. "You'll marry the Sullivan girl. After things are more settled, you can stash her in the city permanently if you don't want her around."

"Bring her out like a doll when needed?" Ronan says. His tone is always flat and hard

to interpret.

"She'll need cleaning up, but your mother will handle that," Dario adds.

"Cleaning up?" War says, sounding confused. What, is War suddenly a parrot? "Don't ask this of me. Anything else but this."

"No, you've forced my hand. It's time you settled down. You want to take over?"

"You know I do." That's all he cares about. Why I thought differently is my own mistake.

"Then this is that last piece." I take another few steps backward before I turn and take off.

The tears burn in my eyes. I place the flowers on the kitchen island as I head back out through the patio. I can't go home right now. My mom will see my face, and she will know I'm upset. She wasn't a fan of this whole thing from the beginning, and seeing me this way will only make her feel worse.

I head toward the pond on the east side of the estate. It's where I always go when I need to think. I don't stop running until I make it to the dock. I swipe at my cheeks.

I'm such a stupid, silly girl. I shake my head at myself. How did I let myself get carried away with excitement over this marriage stuff? Now I really get how upset my mom is. She and Dad are hopelessly in love. I have always wanted a love like that. Mom knows I won't get that with War.

I've let my imagination get away from me when it comes to him. The man never really talked to me, and I made up this whole story in my head that maybe he liked me the same way I did him. I drop down to sit on the dock and let myself cry.

I need to get it out. To have this moment and then harden myself for what's to come because if I know anything, it's that the Marino family always gets what they want. It doesn't matter if you owe them or not. My parents never had a chance.

Neither do I.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Four

#### WARREN

Does he know? I eye my father as he stands to leave.

“This could have been an email,” Z mutters, annoyed he was pulled away from his own office.

He lives and breathes his computer. Our father has no idea the things Z can do, but I might be wrong.

He may be paying better attention to what's going on than I thought.

Even being over in Europe, he seems to still be in the know.

“It’s good for you to get out.” Father straightens his tie. “Maybe you need a wife next.”

“Fuck that.” Z stands.

“The Sullivans did try and talk me into marrying her to you instead.” I watch the blood drain from Z’s face while I fight my own reaction.

They would rather Tova marry Z than me. I can't say I blame them, but that is never fucking happening. The thought alone has me fisting my hands at my sides. I quickly release them, remembering that my father is more perceptive than I thought.

"I'm not War; I'll bounce the fuck out of here," Z warns.

"We'll see," our father says before strolling from my office. Ronan was smart to keep his mouth firmly shut.

"He's really doing this shit." Z shakes his head. "I'm not getting fucking married." Ronan grunts in agreement. None of us should be getting married. While I'm trying to clean things up, it doesn't mean that we still don't have enemies. History just doesn't erase all of the ones we've made.

My own father knows this firsthand. He went through it years ago when our mother was taken. I was fifteen at the time, but I'll never forget those two days. The worry and fear I felt that I would never see her again. They knew where to strike to get my father's full attention.

It worked too. I always knew my father loved our mother, but I hadn't understood how deeply. Gone was the greatly feared Dario once she was kidnapped. I didn't recognize my father for those two days. It changed all of our lives.

It taught me all I needed to know about this lifestyle. Loving someone means you have a weakness. That your enemies have something to use against you. I vowed long ago that I would never be put in that position.

"You need anything?" Ronan asks. I shake my head, not sure how I'm going to handle this. Ronan nods, knocking on my desk twice before turning to leave himself.

"Is there something you need to tell me?" My attention swings to my youngest brother.

"What?" he asks, looking confused by my question. I study his expression. Why had Tova's parents rather her marry him? Does she have a crush on him?

“Is there something going on with you and fucking Tova?” Z’s brows rise, but he doesn’t answer the damn question. I slam my hand down on my desk. “Answer the question.”

“Holy shit, man.” Z puts his hands up, stepping back. “No, I talk to the girl occasionally. She’s sweet.”

“Knock it off,” I order.

“What?” Z laughs, but it doesn’t come out when he sees how serious I am. “You know that sounds crazy, right? You don’t want me to talk to my soon-to-be sister-in-law.” It does sound crazy, or rather insane, but that is fitting. I have never been all that sane when it came to Tova Sullivan.

“I don’t give a shit how it sounds.”

Z cocks his head. “Right.” A half smirk forms.

“Z,” I warn. Little brother or not, I’ll still cold-cock his ass. In fact, that sounds really nice right now.

“I’m heading out. I know that look in your eyes.” Z pulls his keys out of his pocket. “Like I said, she’s sweet. Try not to destroy her.” Z spins on his heels, leaving.

“Fuck,” I mutter, dropping my head back and taking a deep breath. Try not to destroy her. That’s what I have been doing.

I had only seen my little mouse by chance. Tova’s father has worked for my father for years. He does an assortment of jobs. One night he was working the front door of one of our clubs. His wife happened to swing by to bring him dinner. Tova had waited in the car, but I saw her.

There was an air of innocence that surrounded her. It had wrapped around me in a way I hadn't understood. For a week, I couldn't stop thinking about her. Then I started digging and couldn't stop. She took up too many of my thoughts.

It pissed me off. How did a wisp of a girl dominate my life?

Why was I obsessing over her? It made no sense at all.

But I couldn't spend my days and nights that way.

I couldn't keep my eyes on her. If I gave out that order, others would want to know why or find out that this small girl had me wrapped up in knots I couldn't untangle.

That is how she ended up here at the farm. If she was here, behind the walls that gave her protection, then I could rest a little. So many strings I pulled to orchestrate it all. It had all been for nothing. I run a hand down my face.

Knowing I won't be getting anything else done, I leave my office.

As always, I head toward the kitchen. A vase of yellow flowers sits on the kitchen island.

I take them before anyone else can lay claim to them.

I bring them to my office before I head out to the back patio.

My feet are heading in the direction of Tova.

There are two places she lingers, and she has already been in the main garden today, so I make my way toward the pond, not taking the path. There is a chance she would see me if I went that way, and I can't have that.



I pause, about to step off to go around, but what is the point? Does it matter if she sees me now? Does she know her parents are handing her over to me on a silver platter?

Fuck. I grit my teeth; reaching down, I adjust my cock. I have no control over it. Not when it comes to any kind of thought of my little mouse. My mind goes places it has never gone with anyone else. She dominates my thoughts again in a way I don't understand.

What I see and hear as I approach the pond stops me in my tracks. Tova is sitting on the edge of the dock. Her head is in her hands, and her body is shaking with what looks to be silent sobs. The urge to go to her is almost unbearable, but I continue to watch from a distance.

She picks her head up as though she senses someone is watching. Her beautiful dark locks fall away from her face, the sun revealing her tear-stained cheeks. Even when sad, she is stunning.

Seeing her this way guts me in so many different ways. It also answers my question about whether or not her parents have told her about our impending marriage. She obviously doesn't want to marry me. The feeling is mutual, but our reasons differ vastly.

It takes every fiber of my being to remain where I'm standing. To not go to her, lift her in my arms, and comfort her. To not try to wipe away every single tear shed and promise her that everything will be okay. That is not the reality for her, unfortunately, and I will not lie to her.

I continue to watch her as she lifts her glasses, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

She takes a deep breath in before blowing it out completely.

I faintly hear her giving herself a pep talk.

“Get it together, Tova. You're going to make it through this. You're resilient. Life isn't all sunshine and roses. He doesn't...”

“You shouldn't be out here,” I say, cutting her off before she can say anything negative about me. She turns, immediately schooling her features.

It's so unlike her. My little mouse always has a bright smile on her face. I often caught her observing me. I could have sworn she had a small crush on me. But what the fuck do I know? Romantic entanglements were never something I let myself have. Not that I'd wanted them.

I'm going to take over for my father. I saw how his world crashed around him when my mom was taken. I wasn't going to have that same weakness. It hadn't been a hard thing to come to terms with. It also hadn't been something I thought I'd ever want. That made it easy to toss it from my life.

Until Tova.

She lifts her chin. I have the urge to go to her and grip it in my hand. Then to demand that she not cry any more. I expect her to accept the situation and become my wife.

"And why is that?" Tova pulls her shoulders back. Everything she is giving is pure defiance. Tova may not be as delicate as I initially believed. Two seconds in my world, and it's already hardening her.

"You dare question me?"

Her bottom lip puffs out with a slight tremor. I have to fight not to smile. No one but my father questions me. Tova holds my stare for a long moment, not saying a word before she shakes her head and her shoulders drop along with her head.

Without a word, she goes to walk past me. I know better but can't stop myself. As she passes, I reach out and grab her arm. She jerks her head back toward me, making eye contact again. I enjoy those eyes on me far more than I should.

"You will not marry one of my brothers, so get that thought out of your head.

" Her plump lips press together. One of her wild curls has fallen over her glasses.

I reach up and brush it out of her face, getting a feel for how soft her hair truly is.

A question I've long wanted to know. Everything about her is soft and sweet.

"Do you understand?" I push. Tova gives a curt nod. "Say it."

"Understand." She only gives me one word. I want to demand more, but it's unreasonable.

"Go." I release my hold on her arm. The second I do, Tova takes off, running from me.

My little mouse is lucky. I know the walls around the farm keep her locked away and within my reach. She has no idea how badly I want to chase, to hunt, to claim every inch of her.

It would serve her well not to provoke me. That won't bode well for anyone. Especially me.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Five

#### TOVA

Who knew pretending to be happy could take so much energy from you? It's difficult to keep a smile pasted on your face when your heart has been broken. It's easier to avoid everyone than play the part, but I can only do that for so long.

"Sweetheart." Mom knocks on my open bedroom door. "You have a second?"

"Always for you." I plaster a fake smile on my face. It's my parents that I do the most acting for.

Mom steps into my room, taking a seat on my bed. I put down the dress I was adding pockets to.

"Your dad got a message from the Marinos."

"Okay." I shift in my seat. This could be anything, but if it was about the marriage being called off, my mom would have likely burst into my room with excitement.

"There will be a dinner at the main house tonight to celebrate the engagement." I blow out a breath, making my bangs scatter.

"All right." What else can I say? There is no choice. I would rather not see War. I'm still seething over the things he said to me at the pond. The man never talks to me, and he only did to issue orders.

“And War said you aren’t to be in the garden for the next few days.”

“What!” I jump up from my seat, knocking the dress off my lap. I grab it off the floor. “That’s bullcrap. Why?” Is he deliberately trying to hurt me? I don’t understand his reasoning behind it.

“He didn’t give a reason, and I don’t think your father will be asking.” Right, because who dares to question War?

I hate how much I got him wrong, but it only goes to show once again how naïve I have been.

There have been stories about War, or whispers, I suppose.

He is a man to be feared, but I never heeded the warning.

I thought people had him all wrong. That maybe underneath that tough exterior there was a kind man.

But that’s not the case. Right now I’m too heartbroken and pissed to be scared of him.

Again, I’m being foolish. I know this, but still no fear comes.

"Whatever." I huff, dropping down into my chair.

"I'm sorry." Crap.

"You know it's silly." I force that smile back onto my face. "There is no reason for me not to go into the garden, so something must be being done to it." I don't have a clue what that could be or if it's close to true, but I'm going with it.

"You're probably right," Mom agrees. "After tonight, I'm sure the wedding plans will be moving forward."

"Do we have a part in that?" I kind of hope we don't. I'd stupidly been excited about finding a dress and so on, but now I couldn't care less. I'm not going to invest in any of this or allow myself to pull the wool over my eyes.

"I'm not sure, but we'll get a feel for everything tonight."

"Okay." I nod. "I'll pick out a dress." I don't think anything I own will meet the standards. I don't have an item of clothing that I haven't altered in some way or created on my own. No one has "cleaned me up." That is what they said, right?

"We're to be there at seven."

"Got it."

Mom lifts a brow. Okay, she kind of has a point. I might lose track of time often.

"I swear, I got it." The last thing I want to do is be late. I'll get banned from something else. First the pond and now the garden. The two places I love the most.

"Your dad and I are going early to have a cocktail with Rochelle and Dario."

"Was that ordered too?"

"Rochelle called and asked." She and Mom have always gotten along well, but my mom gets along with everyone.

"So kind of an order?"

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I’m sorry.”

“Mom.” I stand up. “Stop apologizing. It’s going to be okay.”

My whole life, my mom has always put my dad and me first. Her life has always centered around us.

She’d do anything to make sure we are taken care of.

I bet if I asked her to help me run away, she’d even do that.

Which isn’t a thing I’d ask her. That would get my parents in a world of trouble, I’m sure.

“I’ll do my best.” Mom gives me a hug. “Seven.”

“Seven,” I repeat before she leaves my room. I close the door behind her, letting out a breath. I can make it through this. I might as well make the best of it for myself. What I won’t be doing is going out of my way for War anymore.

I go in search of an outfit. I decide on a white dress I’d gotten a few months ago.

I haven’t had a chance to wear it yet. It was strapless, but I added pink silk ribbons that you tie into bows for straps.

I also added adorable pockets, placing matching bows on them as well.

The dress goes well with a pair of pink ballet flats I have.

I check myself over in the mirror. It’s cute, but I’m not sure it’s up to par for this dinner party.

I decide that I don't really care. There's nothing I can do about it at this point.

It is what it is. I start playing with my hair and makeup before growing bored.

I debate putting in my contacts, but hate wearing them.

It doesn't matter. I'm not trying to impress War. Those days are over.

Digging through my nightstand, I find my Kindle.

I smile when I see a pre-order has hit my library for a book I've been dying to come out.

Hopefully I'll be able to sneak away, find a corner, and dive in.

It shouldn't be hard. It's not like War will be paying attention.

He ignores me most of the time, so I hope that carries over to tonight.

I roll over to my side. I'll only read the first chapter. There is more than enough time for that.

I should have known better. It's never only one chapter.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Six

#### WARREN

What the fuck is wrong with me? I have been staring at myself in the mirror for the past five minutes, debating whether this is the right shirt to wear this evening. It's a black button-up. My normal. There is nothing to debate, but I find myself wondering what Tova will think.

Checking my watch, I know I need to get downstairs before my mom comes searching for me. I have been doing my best to avoid her since she arrived yesterday. I've been in a pissed-off mood after my encounter with Tova a few days ago. It is all that has dominated my thoughts.

Usually, being around people is the last fucking thing I want to do.

All of the niceties, dressing up, and socializing.

The thought alone would usually have me steering clear of this entire situation.

But this unfortunately comes with the territory.

It's the road that needs to be traveled in order for me to take over for my father and push our family business in a new direction.

No matter how many times I try to convince myself that I've been staring in this mirror, trying to look perfect for business reasons, I know deep down inside it's for

my little mouse.

There's a spark of excitement in me that only she can ignite.

That only grew more with the way she defied me at the pond the other day.

The mere thought has me reaching down to adjust my cock.

I've been hard since my encounter with her. Since I felt the softness of her hair pass through my fingertips and how her pillowy lips set in a hard line to defy me.

The last few nights I've jerked my cock more than I'm willing to admit, picturing my hands entangled in her hair as she wrapped those pillows around my cock, her delicate hand stroking it.

Those gorgeous eyes of hers looking up at me as she took me inch by inch, deep into her throat.

Fuck. I need to focus or I'm never going to leave this room.

Tova may not want to marry me, but she's mine regardless. Her destiny was set in stone long before my father ever devised this marriage plan. From the moment I laid eyes on her, she's been mine. I thought of her that way even when I was sure I could never have her.

I can't say I blame her. The man staring back at me doesn't scream the marriage type.

My size alone is intimidating. My broody mood doesn't help.

Then there are the tattoos that cover most of my upper body.

I decide to keep the top button of my shirt undone.

I refuse to fully hide who I am, especially from her.

My little mouse needs to know exactly what she is getting herself into.

“War!” My mom greets me as I enter the parlor. The only time this room is ever used is for events like this one. When it’s only family, we are far more casual, often not even using the dining room for dinner. We all gather in the kitchen for the most part.

“Mom.” I give her a curt nod. “You look lovely this evening.”

“Oh hush.” Mom rolls her eyes. “Lean down here.” I do as I’m told so my mom can place a kiss on each of my cheeks.

Mom has always been the affectionate type.

I can’t recall a time when I was completely comfortable with it.

It never felt natural to me. I’m different from the rest of my family.

I understood that from a young age. I simply process things differently and might be missing a few key parts upstairs, but it’s never been a problem before.

“Come and say hello to everyone.” There are a handful of guests here from other high-ranking families. I make my rounds, greeting everyone. My eyes keep lingering toward the doorway as I pretend to sip on my scotch. Where the hell is she?

Her parents are here already. Mom told me she’d invited them early to have drinks. Tova’s mother Becca continues to stare at me when she thinks no one is watching. The woman wants me dead. She’ll have to get in line.

“Are you avoiding the parents?” Ronan comes to stand beside me. “The in-laws.” He shakes his head. They will be my in-laws. Ronan cocks his head toward me, waiting for an answer that won’t be coming because once he asked the question, I realized he was right. I was avoiding them.

“Not sure how to deal with them yet,” I admit to my brother.

The only person that I would. The only person I have ever avoided is Tova, and I did a shit job of that.

I knew when she entered the house. I had an alert set.

That way I could pass by her and get my daily fix. One I haven’t gotten in days.

“Because you want them to like you?” Ronan asks.

“I could give a shit less if they like me.” I take a sip of my drink.

What I care about is my soon-to-be wife. I’m guessing she is going to want me to be on good terms with them. I know she is close to her parents. That had been key when I’d moved her parents here to the property. I knew she’d be with them.

“You give a shit if your wife likes you?”

I grunt a response. I care far too much, but no one else needs to know that.

“Is she avoiding you ?” Ronan makes a show to look around. If Tova was here, you’d know. You can’t miss her.

“Yes.” The one word comes out short and hard. This evening would be a lot easier if she was here. At least I could watch her.

With each second that ticks by and Tova doesn't show, my irritation is growing. So does my worry, but I know there is no chance she snuck out. She is still on these grounds. In fact, Tova should still be in her home.

"I'm surprised you're finally getting married.

" Cora tilts her head up toward me. She is the daughter of Leo.

Leo has already married off his two other daughters.

Cora is the last one standing. I've heard there have been fights over her.

Her father appears to be holding out. I honestly don't understand it.

A strong floral smell comes from her, making a dull headache start to form. Tova always smells of wildflowers and sunshine. That floral smell is addicting. I'm not sure what's wrong with Cora's scent. It's probably artificial, much like the rest of her.

"It was time," I respond, keeping my answer short to discourage further conversation. Cora shifts closer to me.

"It would have been nice to know you were searching for a wife."

"I wasn't searching." I had no intention of marrying. It was twofold. I'd long ago resolved myself to my obsession with Tova. There has never been an attraction or sexual desire toward another woman. I've never had it. It's why I knew I was so different from everyone else.

I could see the lust in some of my men's eyes when at a club or when business called for us to go to a strip club. I saw it more so at the brothel. The men would fall all over themselves with their need.

It used to piss me off that they could be so weak-willed for an orgasm. A thing you could handle yourself if need be. I didn't understand. That was until Tova. She has this strange hold over me that is unbreakable.

"Oh, you just had your father pick? My father wasn't aware. You know?—"

"Don't." I cut her off when she brings her hand up to touch my shoulder.

It stops a few inches from me. "Cora, listen very carefully to me.

" I lean down so no one else can hear me.

"Do not come into my home and disrespect my fiancée.

" I let the coldness bleed into my words.

"I don't care who your daddy is." Cora swallows audibly.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I nod in response and step around her. My patience is now gone. I make my way toward the Sullivans. Everyone stops speaking when I reach them.

"Where is my fiancée?" I ask. My words come out harsher than I intend, but I'm tired of waiting. I need to see Tova. She's my drug, and I need my hit. I've been jonesing to be near her.

"I'll go check on her. She can be?—"

"I'll go." I don't wait for the protest I know is coming. I leave the room, making my way toward the back of the house and out the patio.

When I get to her family's house, I don't bother knocking. The sensor lock on the door opens for me, as all doors do on my property.

I don't have to guess which room is Tova's. I turn the knob slowly, opening the door to see her asleep on her bed. Her dark hair is spread out all around her in rich, thick waves. I walk to the side of the bed and stare down at her.

Her angelic face is so damn innocent. I don't want that to be taken from her. No matter how much I clean up our family's dealings, it will never be enough to match her.

An e-reader is lying beside her. When I pick it up, curiosity gets the best of me. What the fuck is she reading? I flip to the next page, reading in great detail about a girl giving her boss a blow job under his desk. However cliché the details it goes into are.

“Hey.” The e-reader is ripped from my hand. “That’s private.” She holds it tight to her chest. “You don’t just read a girl’s Kindle.”

“Don’t want your future husband to see the dick sucking you’re reading about?” Tova’s mouth falls open, making my mind flash to her under my desk with her mouth ready for me. I hadn't meant to be so crude with her, but I find I'm jealous. Yes, that is the correct word.

It is, after all, an emotion only she can elicit from me. Along with so many others.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Seven

#### TOVA

Did he really say that to me? What is he even doing here? “You’re in my bedroom,” I blurt out. The room feels so much smaller with him dominating the space. His all-black suit and tattoos are a stark contrast to my bright yellow walls.

When I woke up, I thought I’d been dreaming that War was in my room standing over me while I lay in my bed.

“I am.” War starts to make his way around my room. His eyes are taking it all in. I can’t help but feel a little self-conscious wondering what he’s thinking. I haven’t made many updates to my bedroom. I want to rush over and toss the stuffed animals on my dresser into the closet.

“You’re in my bedroom,” I repeat.

“We have already covered that.” War’s fingers run across the edge of my vanity. “No perfume.”

“What?” I sit up, throwing my legs over the side of the bed. I hadn’t meant to fall asleep.

“You don’t have any perfume.” I’m not sure if that’s a statement or a question.

“I shower.” Is he saying I smell? “Do I need some? Will that be a part of the wife I’m



expected to become?

” I stand. “This is the dress I have.” I motion up and down myself.

“It’s all I have, so you’ll have to deal with that.

” War’s eyes trace down my body and all the way back up.

I feel every second of them on me as though it’s a physical touch.

“No perfume.” He says this simply, devoid of any emotion. You’d never know I was glaring him down. It has no effect on him, but I’m not sure it would on anyone, honestly. “I like the dress. Though maybe you should put your hair up.”

“Seriously?” I run my fingers through my hair. “Is it that bad? I fell asleep.”

“It is rather distracting.” War comes toward me. I fight the urge to step back, but there is nowhere for me to go. I’m up against my bed.

“Distracting?” I manage to get out. He’s so dang close to me now.

“Yes.” I watch in shock as War wraps a piece of my hair around his finger. I’m not sure how long we stand there.

“Should we, ah”—I lick my lips—“go?”

“Yes.” He releases the piece of hair he had wrapped around his finger. I use the tie on my wrist to pull my hair up. After giving me a nod of approval, War grabs me by the wrist. His hand wraps around it tightly.

“You just came into our home?” Rude, but I suppose he does own everything here.

Including me at this point.

“Yes.” Again with the one-word answers. I try to tug my wrist free from his hold when we exit the house. He stops walking.

“Can you let me go?” I tug again, but his hold only tightens. One of his fingers drifts to stroke back and forth.

“No.”

“Oh my gosh.” I roll my eyes. “You and the one-word answers. This is going to be a lovely marriage,” I mutter, realizing too late what I've said out loud. I should keep those thoughts to myself. They are pointless to say. War isn't going to change for me.

“I do not wish to let go. We are engaged.” Okay, wow. That's not one word.

“If you want to act engaged?—”

“It's not an act.”

“Right.” I shake my head. “Then maybe don't say you don't like my hair and I smell.”

“I never said any of those things.” His brows furrow together as he stares down at me.

“You did.” Is he trying to gaslight me?

“I don't want you to wear perfume because I enjoy the way you already smell, and as I said, your hair is distracting to me.

” He reaches out, pulling my hair loose so it spills out around me.

“Distracting.” War runs his fingers through it.

Now he’s closer than ever, towering over me and, well, playing with my hair?

I might still be asleep and I don’t know it because this is usually how my dreams go.

“War.”

“You call me Warren,” he orders before he is once again walking. I have no choice but to go with him.

My mind races with everything that just happened. Only when we enter the house and everyone greets us and introduces themselves to me does my mind return to the present moment. The whole time, Warren keeps his hand wrapped around my wrist, often stroking his fingers back and forth in a soft caress.

There are faces I recognize beyond the Marino family. A few I don’t recall ever seeing before. My mom keeps giving me reassuring smiles. I sip on the wine Warren handed to me.

“You know you’re supposed to hold the hand, not the wrist.” Z comes to stand next to us. A pretty blonde also joins us. I can tell she belongs to a rich family that is very much a part of this world.

"Don't tell me how to handle my fiancée."

"Handle?" I whisper.

"He's not great with words." Z shrugs. I peek over at Warren, who is glaring so hard at him I want to take a step back. Z shifts, but he doesn't back down from toying with his brother.

“I’m Cora.” The tall blonde introduces herself with a smile. I saw her earlier giving me more than a once-over. Cora's dress fits her like a glove. You can tell it’s expensive. I hate that it makes me feel out of place, but I am.

“Tova.” I formally introduce myself, returning the smile, but there is a coldness to her. She holds her hand out to me. “Sorry, he won't let go.” I have a wine glass in one hand, and Warren still has his hold on my wrist. Cora laughs, but it sounds forced.

“Dinner is ready,” Warren’s mom, Rochelle, announces. “Come.” She ushers us all along. “Sit at this end, Tova. We haven't had a chance to talk, and we have a ton of wedding planning to do.”

“Okay,” I agree. Warren pulls out a chair for me, having to let my hand go at this point. They have decorated the entire dining room. You’d think this was the wedding reception. There are breathtaking flowers that run down the center of the table. “These flowers are beautiful.”

“Do you like it?” Rochelle asks. My mom sits beside her. Dario, of course, sits to the side of his wife.

“I love them.”

“We can use this florist for the wedding. That takes care of one item.” Rochelle lets out a small laugh. “The florist got them to me quickly, so it shouldn’t be a problem. I planned to have some grabbed from the garden, but War, for some reason, told me to leave them be.”

I jerk my head toward Warren, wondering why he’d done that and if it’s also connected to him saying I have to stay out of the garden for a few days.

Rochelle and my mom fall into wedding talk.

I occasionally contribute to the conversation.

Warren doesn't speak much at all. His father does, however, stand up and make a toast to the happy couple.

Too bad we're not happy at all. Warren doesn't want to marry me, and as pissed as I am about everything, I'm more heartbroken than anything.

"Are you not hungry?" Warren asks.

"I'm okay." I shrug. I want to go back home. This is all too much.

"Not to be rude—" Warren stands.

"That would be a first," Z says loudly under his breath. Warren ignores him. I fight a laugh myself.

"I'm going to steal my fiancée away." He pulls my chair out for me.

"Right now?" my mom asks.

"Yes, Mom." I respond to her before anyone else can.

I'm not sure what will happen if she tries to say that I can't go. I'm uncertain how well that would be received. Besides, I'm marrying Warren. Being alone with him will be my life in a few short weeks. We might as well spend some time together. I mean, I'm not sure how that's going to go, but I'd pretty much do anything rather than continue to be at this dinner.

"All right, sweetheart."

I take Warren's hand and let him guide me from the dining room. The second we are free of everyone, I release a breath.

"Was it that bad?" Warren asks.

"It's a lot," I admit. "Do you go to things like that often?" I have seen him pictured in a few local headlines going to events.

"When I have to. It's part of the job."

Right, because all of this is a responsibility to him. Nothing more. That's why he'll marry me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Eight

#### WARREN

Tova is quiet as I lead us down the path to the garden.

The sun has long set, and the lights I had installed a few years ago keep it illuminated.

Night or day, Tova makes her way out here often.

I know my grounds are secure, and there is nothing I should have to worry about, but you can never be too safe.

The lights had been a must, and so had the cameras.

I had to get her out of that dining room.

With each question about the wedding, I could see my girl retreating into herself.

The attention made her push food around her plate without eating.

I know she has to be comfortable around people to come out of her shell.

I hated that she was uncomfortable in what was to be her own home.

“I’m not allowed in here. I’ve been grounded for a few days.”

“Grounded?”

“Your note to my parents.” Ah, is that why she is so mad at me? I thought maybe it was the barging into her bedroom. I suppose I could have knocked, but I hadn’t wanted to. I needed to get my eyes on her, and that was the quickest way. I won’t apologize for that. It would be a lie to do so.

“It’s for your own good.” Everything I do is for her sake.

“How do you know what is for my own good?! You don’t know me.” Tova raises that chin of hers.

That’s laughable. I know more about her than I do anyone else.

All the small details, everything she does.

I soak it all in like a ravenous animal.

I have to fight not to dig deeper into her.

That’s why I keep my distance. It would only make my obsession with her grow more, but I suppose that doesn’t matter anymore.

“Don’t be so sure about that, little mouse.”

Her nose scrunches. “Mouse?”

“Always curious and slipping in and out around the farm.”

“Except the garden.”



“You’ve been in the garden far too much.”

“What does it matter?” She throws her hands up. “I mean, why do you even care?” I don’t miss the hurt in her tone.

“You burnt your cheeks and here.” I lift her arm to show her.

“It’s a sunburn.” Her expression turns to confusion.

“And you didn’t wear your sunscreen. You can’t spend hours outside without protection.” How can she not see that? Her skin is so fair and lovely. “You are now under my care.” If she won’t watch out for herself, then I will.

She has been under my protection from the second I laid eyes on her, but now she truly is.

I don’t have to make up excuses and reasons to keep her tucked away safe here.

My father’s idea might not be so horrible after all.

I get to keep her closer than ever, but I can pretend to the rest of the world she is merely a wife I was forced to marry.

That way no one will ever know the depth of my feelings for her.

If my enemies think she doesn’t mean anything to me, they won’t hurt her to get to me.

“You’re really worried about a sunburn?” Tova’s whole face softens.

“I worry about a lot of things.” I reach up, brushing one of her curls the wind blew

astray out of her face. “Sit with me.”

Tova sits on the bench next to me. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I always worry about you.”

“Always?” Tova tilts her head, having caught my slip of the tongue. A stupid one.

“I’ll always watch over you. You’ll be my wife,” I say. She already doesn’t want to marry me. If she knew all the things I’ve done, she would run from me. Not that she’d get far.

“Right.” Tova wrings her fingers together in her lap, her gaze dropping there, and I know I’ve said the wrong thing.

“This upsets you?” I want to know how to fix this, but maybe I can’t. That’s not acceptable.

“It is what it is.” She shrugs one of her delicate shoulders.

“I like this.” I touch the ribbon strap on her dress.

“Really?” Her eyes brighten, and she sits up straighter.

“I say what I mean.”

“So no lies?” She cocks a brow like this is a challenge.

“No lies, I just won’t answer.”

“You know, I’ll take that.” A small laugh leaves her. I let myself soak in the sound.

“Now, tell me why it upsets you that I will watch over you.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” I snap back harsher than I mean to, making Tova lean back.

“It does matter to me,” I repeat but softer this time.

Tova sits there not saying a word, and I know I can’t order her to speak.

She is not one of my men or employees. I take a page from my father’s book when he’s pissed off Mom. “Please.”

“Please?” She peeks over at me.

“Please.” I repeat the word. I make a mental note that the word pleases her. So did I when I complimented her dress.

“It’s silly.”

“I still want to know.”

“Fine.” She puffs out a small breath. “It’s the idea that my husband watches out for me because he has to.”

“Every husband should.” I’m getting the sense this is one of those moments I’m missing the emotional part.

“They should want to.” There it is. Her wanting me to care tells me so many things.

“And you think I don’t want to?”

“I’m just another one of your responsibilities or jobs. However you see it.” She waves her hand around at everything. I grab her hand, linking my fingers with hers, taking a note from Z.

“I promise you that I want to take care of you, Tova.”

“And you wouldn't lie to me.”

I move without thinking, my other hand coming to cup her cheek. “No,” I tell her. “No, I wouldn't lie to you,” I quickly add.

Another giggle bubbles free from her.

“Did you add that last part so it wasn't a one-word answer?”

“I did.” I lean closer, breathing in her sweet, flowery smell. The hint of sun is still clinging to her. “Know this, little mouse. You come before all others now.”

Her eyes search my face before they drop to my mouth. The overwhelming need to kiss her floods through my body.

“Are you going to kiss me?”

I stare into her amber eyes. This close, I can see specks of gold in them. “Yes,” I tell her before brushing my mouth against hers. Lust surges through my body. Tova's eyes fall closed. “I'm in unfamiliar territory here.” I press my mouth against hers again, this time deepening the kiss.

Tova's hands come to my chest, but she doesn't push me away. Instead, her delicate fingers grip the front of my shirt as she leans farther into me.

I swipe my tongue across her bottom lip. A small gasp leaves her, her mouth parting for me. I slip my tongue into her mouth, needing to taste her. A deep groan leaves me when her tongue meets mine, matching my strokes.

It's a fight to not grab her and pull her into my lap. I don't want the kiss to end. I had no idea how intoxicating kisses could be.

Tova pulls back slightly, her eyes fluttering open. We might have stopped kissing, but I don't pull away.

"This is unfamiliar territory for you?"

"I don't want you to be upset." Tova lets me press a kiss to her cheek and then another.

"Are you kissing my sunburn?" She giggles. I suppose I am. I'm just not ready to pull away yet.

"I enjoy my mouth on you." Reluctantly, I lean back.

"I might enjoy it too." Tova gives me a smirk.

"Good," I tell her because soon I'll taste every inch of her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Nine

#### TOVA

This is one of those times I hate that my best friend lives states away.

I could use her help right now. Marks would both love and hate to help with wedding planning.

It would be fun to have her here. Not that I don't love that I have my mom to help with anything I need.

I do, but she's so hesitant about this wedding.

It doesn't help that I can't get a read on her with Warren's mom, Rochelle.

The other night at the party, they'd gotten along. They always have, but things are different now. Orders had been given, and I know my mom is not a fan of that. I'm sure it has put a strain on whatever kind of friendship they do have.

"Have a look at these." Rochelle hands me an iPad. "You can scroll through the pictures the florist sent over."

"Thanks." I take the tablet from her.

We're up at the main house in the library. It's one of my favorite rooms in the house. It has an old-school vibe with dark, rich woods covering everything from the floors to

the walls, which are lined with thick wooden shelves from floor to ceiling.

There are chairs scattered about the room and a stone fireplace that is taller than I am. The tables even have those lights where you pull the chain to turn them on. The room has now been turned into ground zero for wedding prep. It's all a lot to take in.

"You favor yellow, right?" Rochelle asks.

"I do." I don't wear the color often, so how did she know that? "Pink as well."

"Yes, that's what War told me." Rochelle is now picking up a fancy plate that has a gold etching on it. I bet it's real.

"War told you?" How the heck did he know that?

"Yes. Isn't that what you told him?" A slow smile forms on her mouth. "During your late-night stroll?" Heat rushes to my face thinking about the other night. Warren had kissed me. The kiss was unlike him. It was soft, and he took his time.

"You're blushing," Mom points out.

"Oh, so did more than talking of wedding plans happen?" I don't think there had been much wedding talk at all. "Interesting." Rochelle's brows pull together as if in deep thought about that.

"What is interesting?" I ask, wanting to know. It could give me a peek into Warren, who is far more complicated than I realized. The man can come off so cold, but beneath that is a whole other side to him. I'm trying not to get my hopes up again, but I have a sneaking suspicion that maybe I was right about him all along. There is another side to him that he doesn't show people.

Maybe the softer, more open side of him is Warren, and the cold, unfeeling, stoic side to him is War. A name he doesn't want me calling him while everyone else does.

"I've never seen my son interested in a woman before."

"He doesn't have much of a choice." I hand her the iPad back. "These are my favorite of the flowers." I try to steer the conversation back to the wedding, not wanting to expose a side of Warren that he may not want others to see.

"Oh, these are beautiful." My mom nods in agreement with Rochelle. "War might be getting ready for a wife, but that doesn't mean he'd be so invested in getting things ready for you. Hell, he told all of us to stay out of your garden."

"My garden?" I shake my head. "It's not mine." Is that why he told her she couldn't get flowers from the garden the other day?

"You might not call it yours, but your fiancé does." Rochelle shrugs. "You see these?" She shows my mom the iPad. They start discussing place settings. There is a lot that goes into one of these weddings, but then again, this is all for show.

I pull out my phone to text Marks. I have to open a special app Marks had me download forever ago to send messages.

I thought it was strange at first, but the more I got to know her, the more I understood it.

She thinks everyone is watching everything.

The Signal app makes it impossible for anyone to be able to ever read your messages.

I tell her about Rochelle's comments. Marks is not into weddings or men unless it's



killing them in-game or within the pages of one of our books; she is still down for the tea. I had to fill her in a lot. It beyond shocked her when I told her I was getting married and to whom.

She knows some about my living situation. I don't provide all the details or use full names. Never once have I said the Marino last name. I don't think she'd know it, but I'd rather keep my distance from her and it.

Marks: He knew your favorite colors.

Marks: How?

That's her question? I more wanted to know if he's into getting married to me. Which is a stupid question because I'd overheard what he thought of the wedding already, so I don't ask that question.

Me: I must wear it a lot?

Marks: You wear all kinds of colors. In fact, if I go off the clothes you make, I would say your favorite colors are pink and white.

That is true.

I should stop trying to look into every small thing when it comes to Warren.

It was two days ago that I last saw him.

He's been gone. Not so much of a peep from him.

I bet it's something I should get used to, him coming and going, and me having no idea where or when he'll be back. That, I can't ask either.

I tuck my phone back away when my mom asks me a question, not wanting to be rude. For the next two hours, I respond to countless questions.

“Ladies.” My head jerks up at the sound of Warren's voice. He's here. I can't help the butterflies that form in my stomach at the sound of his voice.

He avoids making eye contact with me, looking in every direction but mine. I guess I'm invisible all of a sudden. Whatever. I pull my phone back out. My mom and Rochelle respond with a hi. I keep my lips firmly pressed together, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

“How goes the planning?” He steps farther into the library, I see out of the corner of my eye.

“It's going. We need to schedule a day to visit the dress shop. Sooner rather than later.” Rochelle responds.

“They will come here.”

“War, it's not that simple. The store will have a hundred dresses for her to choose from.”

“Then I'll send a giant truck and men to load them to bring here.” His tone broaches no argument.

“That's too much.” Rochelle stands. “Is there an issue or threat I don't know about?”

Threat?

“There is no need for Tova to go anywhere.” Whoa, now he's got my full attention. Honestly, I realize I never actually go anywhere. This place is so big; going from one

place to another around here feels as though you did go somewhere, but really you never leave the walls of the farm.

“Ah, you don’t want her going anywhere.”

“Me?” I jerk my head up, unable to pretend Warren isn’t right there, as handsome as ever. When my gaze lands on him, I notice his hair is a tad unruly and his eyes appear tired.

“For now, yes.” His eyes stay locked with her. “Tova, my office.” Is he ordering me around? I can’t help but be annoyed. I haven’t seen him in days after kissing me, and then he comes in all rude. Not bothering to spare me a glance either. Until now, when he has orders to give.

“Sweetheart, we—” my mom starts to say.

“Please.” The word echoes through the room, surprising all of us. At least I’m guessing because I once again have my eyes on Warren. “Please, come to my office so we can speak.” Warren steps toward me, holding his hand out.

“All right.” I take his hand, letting him lead me out of the library into his office. I’ve never been inside it before. Warren closes the door quickly behind us. I hear the lock click into place. “Warren.”

“Little mouse.” He tugs me into him, his mouth coming down onto mine in a possessive kiss that takes my breath away. It’s a complete surprise. Unlike our first kiss, this one is deep, possessive, and hungry.

His hand trails up my back, his fingers digging into my hair.

He gives a small tug, and my head goes back farther so he can deepen this kiss even

more.

“Kiss me back,” he orders, taking my mouth again.

I almost want to laugh, but I’m still a bit shocked.

He lifts his mouth from mine again, staring down into my eyes. I can tell he is exhausted. “Please.”

I lean up and press my mouth to his this time. A low groan leaves him. When he thrusts his tongue into my mouth, I match his strokes. Warren presses his body against mine, pinning me to the door.

“Warren?” I moan when his mouth leaves mine to trail open-mouth kisses down my neck. I grip his shoulders, needing to hold on to them.

“You always smell of sunshine.” His hands go under my dress to my ass, lifting me off the ground. I wrap my legs around him, feeling the hardness of his cock press against my sex. He grinds against me, rubbing my clit, making it throb.

"Ohh," I moan at the sensation.

"I missed you." I dig my nails into him. His voice carries a glimmer of longing, not the normal coldness there usually is.

"You miss me?" I rock my hips against him. I know saying he missed me isn't dirty talk, but it might as well be. It ignites a fire throughout my entire body. A yearning grows deep inside of me.

"You have no idea." He lifts his head to meet my gaze. "I want to watch you come for me." He thrusts forward, his cock rubbing my clit.

"Yes," I moan in agreement. I try to rock my hips more, but his hold on me tightens, pinning me in place.

" I want to make you come." His tone leaves no room for argument. He thrusts forward again, only this time fast, rutting back and forth and hitting my clit perfectly.

There is no holding back. All the sensations and his words overload my body. It's unlike anything I have ever felt before. It's frightening and overwhelming, yet I yearn for it. I need it. Warren's mouth latches on to my neck, sucking.

My body explodes. A keening cry leaves me as pleasure sweeps through me.

"Fuck yes," I hear Warren say as the climax lingers inside of me. My whole body is as sensitive as a live wire.

A grunt comes from Warren, his body jerking.

"Sweet Tova," he whispers into my ear. "I'll never let you go."

Is that a promise or a threat? I know it shouldn't, but my heart hopes it's the first. With Warren, you never really know. I suppose only time will tell.

### Chapter Ten

#### WARREN

I trace my finger back and forth over the hair tie that's been on my wrist since I removed it from Tova's hair. I'm not sure why I haven't taken it off. It's been there for over a week. The smell of her is long gone from it.

I wish I had a new one that still had her scent on it, but I know the only way to get it would be to go and see her. Though I guess I could slip into her home easily enough. I don't trust myself not to take only a hair tie if I were in her bedroom alone.

All I have been able to think about since I pinned her to my office door like a barbaric Neanderthal are the sounds of her moans of pleasure as she came undone for me.

I still don't understand what came over me that afternoon.

I've tried to create some space with Tova since then, not trusting myself, but I'm starting to see that it doesn't do shit. It has only made me ravenous for her. It's gnawing at me right now.

That pull I have to her constantly trying to take me to her.

I know I'm in a losing battle, but I need to keep reminding myself that this is for her own good.

I run a hand down my face, exhausted. Sleep isn't coming easily, either.

I never needed much, but right now, I'm not getting any.

I can't shut my mind off from thoughts of Tova.

Now that I know she'll be mine, the floodgates have opened to all the things I want to do to her and for her.

I can't explain it. I think that is part of what is driving me so insane.

I'm trying to rationalize it, but there is nothing rational about it.

"We're having a bachelor party after all?" Z drops down in the seat adjacent to me. I shoot him a look that tells him I'm not in the mood. "What? Beating the shit out of someone sounds like a bachelor party for War if I ever heard of one."

"Can I get you a drink, sir?" One of the cocktail waitresses bends down, giving Z a view of her tits. They're pushed up high from the corset she has strapped around her. You could never hide a weapon in that.

"I'm good," Z tells her.

She doesn't bother to ask me, knowing I want to be left alone. It's not often I come down to Bourbon Street. The front part is a high-end strip club while the back is a brothel. On the outside, you'd never know what's inside, but that is the whole point.

This place is a double-edged sword. We have all kinds of people coming and going from here. They range from high-ranking government officials to doctors and famous people of all types. None of them want anyone to know that they visit this place. This ensures they remain under my control.

If we didn't own and oversee this place, someone else would.

It also protects the girls who want to do this work.

This is supposed to be a safe space for that.

That's the reason I'm here now. One of the clients had gotten out of hand.

Normally, I wouldn't handle it myself, but I could release some tension at this moment. Plus, every now and then I like to send the message myself, knowing people are always watching. Everyone needs to know that I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty.

Ronan drops down into the chair across from me. "Why are you here?"

"I could ask you the same question." Ronan puts his feet up on the table between us, leaning back to get comfortable. I pull the hair tie and let it snap against my wrist to focus on that, not my annoyance with my brothers.

"It's his bachelor party," Z answers when I don't. "And were you raised in a fucking barn?" He shoves Ronan's feet off the table. "Don't put your feet on the table."

"I bet worse has been on that table." Ronan nods to the other end of the room, where two strippers are all over a businessman.

I watch them for a second, but I don't feel any desire. Even when I walked in here earlier, I hadn't felt a spark of anything. There were nude women dancing on the stages throughout. Sex has never been a desire before, but now it's only targeted at Tova.

"You know, I could ask them to come join you. I'm sure they'd drop that poor schmuck to give you more than a couple of dances." I turn my attention back toward my brothers.



"Fuck off." I stand up, adjust my suit jacket, and check the time.

I'm about to pull my phone out when I see Violet headed toward me. She has run this place since before I was born. It's not often people get out of line here and Violet can't handle it herself, but this one is different.

"Evening, boys." Violet tucks a piece of her purple hair behind her ear. The woman is always dressed in latex. I'm not sure how she manages to wear it all day, every day. It sounds painful, but from what I hear, Violet is all about the pain, and many pay for the privilege to enjoy it with her.

"As lovely as ever, Ms. Violet," Z says, coming to his feet. Ronan stands but doesn't utter a word.

"Violet." I give her a curt nod.

"You're getting married tomorrow?—"

"Don't offer him a dance or room." Z's hand comes down on my shoulder.

"I would never." Violet shakes her head. "If I know anything, it's men, and War has no interest in that."

"I am interested in the man you alerted me to." Violet never directly reaches out to me except on rare occasions. That means that whoever this client is she is having an issue with has power of some kind.

I hadn't bothered to ask too many details over the phone because I knew I would be coming down here myself. It is getting me out of the house and away from Tova.

That way I don't pounce on her like a rabid animal that has no control. How am I

going to be able to manage when she's in my bed every night? The thought has my cock starting to harden for the first time since I entered this place. Go fucking figure.

"He's a cop. Not one of ours."

"A cop?" Z echoes my thoughts. "How does a cop afford this place?"

"Trust fund kid."

"I want to know how he got in here."

"I already sent you his file details." Violet nods her head for us to follow her to the back of the club.

"He's pretty new and had an incident a month ago with one of my girls.

He's rough, but I'm starting to see that he doesn't want to have one of the girls that is trained for such a thing.

I think he gets off on them being inexperienced. "

"He wants to see fear in their eyes." That's what he's after.

"He's got a real thing for power and control."

As do I, but I'm not beating the shit out of women. No. Instead I'm going to enjoy beating the shit out of him. Cop or not, he needs to know there's a line you don't cross. I won't tolerate this sort of disrespect to either the women here or to my family.

Violet enters the code for the basement door. The lock clicking over is loud and heavy.

"Allow me." Ronan grabs the door to open it. It's as thick as a vault door. Nothing escapes this room unless I allow it. Not even screams.

"I'll leave you boys to it." Violet steps back. "I already know the answer, but as always, let me know if I can get you some entertainment when you're done." I don't hear my brothers' responses. I'm already descending the stairs.

The man lifts his head when he hears me come in. I almost want to laugh. They have him tied to a chair with fuzzy pink handcuffs. He blinks a few times before his eyes widen with fear. The stench of ammonia fills the air.

"Aww, man," Z mutters, coming to stand next to me. "He already pissed himself." It's not surprising. Men like him do it all the time. They're only tough when pushing weaker individuals around. At the first sign of real trouble, they either try to buy or beg their way out.

That's what he's already doing. Sobbing and pleading. I'm sure the women he beats on do the same. I also bet the people he comes into contact with during his job do as well.

"Violet always does know what a man needs." Ronan runs his hands across the tools laid out on the table.

"I'm only here for the show." Z grabs one of the chairs in the corner, dropping down into it. "First time I have ever said that here."

"Wait, what, what are you going to do to me?" the man in the chair stammers.

"Don't speak." I backhand him, snapping his head back. He lets out a yelp.

"He's fucking loud." Ronan picks up a hammer, tosses it in the air, and catches it by

the wooden handle. He can turn anything into a weapon and use it like it's a part of him.

"We've only just started." I grab him by the hair and yank backwards, taking the chair with it so it's on two legs, and pull them both across the room. He screams the whole way.

"I'm sorry." He sobs.

"Did she cry? Plead?" He doesn't respond, but I'm not really wanting an answer. "Tape," I tell Ronan. He grabs the duct tape off the table, tossing it to me. I pull a piece off and slap it across his mouth. I can't listen to his high-pitched cries.

"Since we're all here, should we talk about why our brother is in such a pissy mood lately?" Z asks, putting his hands behind his head, getting comfortable. "And don't say it's about getting married. It's about who should not be named."

"You mean the one we never talk about." All my attention swings back to my brothers. I stare at them for a long second, neither of them saying another word.

"You know."

"I don't miss much." Ronan shrugs.

"I know everything." Z wiggles his brows.

He is a smart little shit, but it's more tech-related.

Z leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees.

"The thing I'm missing is why are you avoiding the girl?"

You can have her now. I mean, you always could have, but you're not all right in the head. " He taps the side of his temple.

"You moved her in," Ronan points out.

The fucker behind me makes another sound. I turn back around and hit him hard enough to knock him out for a few minutes.

"And I put a target right on her head. I just didn't know it would be my own fucking father that would bring it to the light. I need to keep her safe."

"Why is that, War?" Z leans back in his chair again. "Why do you need to keep her so safe? She was fine out there in the world."

"No, she wasn't!" I bark.

"Why not?" Z pushes.

"If I latched on to her, someone who doesn't tend to be drawn to females, sexual or otherwise, then anyone else with eyes would too. She's not safe wandering around." It sounds logical in my head, but as I speak the words, I can hear they are crazy.

"I'm not rational when it comes to her, and I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. "

"All right then." Z comes to his feet. "Why don't you tell us what you do and want to do to her?"

"Watch it." I take a step toward my brother.

"Mind out of the gutter." Z shakes his head at Ronan. "I was thinking more along the lines of jewelry or a romantic date." Ronan cracks a partial smile.

"How about you finish with this guy?" Ronan nods to the knocked-out man. "Then we'll give you dating tips."

"You two have dating tips?" I glance between the two of them. Z is married to his computer, and I'm not sure what the fuck Ronan does in his free time, but it's not romantic.

"We got Google," Z says, like we're the dumbest shits in the world.

"You do realize I get married tomorrow," I remind them both. We're miles past dating.

"Then finish with him already. Place fucking stinks."

Z's not wrong. This place fucking stinks and tastes like shit. Everything does when you don't get to kiss and smell the fresh flowers and sunshine that is my soon-to-be wife.

Without her, everything is starting to be pointless anymore.

### Chapter Eleven

#### TOVA

In all my life, I have never snuck out before.

I'm not really sure this would count because I'm an adult who is getting married tomorrow.

It's that I don't want to explain anything to anyone right now.

Except my best friend, but she's coming with me.

I want to be able to talk freely and not worry that my parents might overhear us.

I slide the window open before dragging my vanity chair over to it to stand on. I flip off my bedroom light and grab my headphones. I'm halfway out the window when a vibration scares me, making me tumble right out the window and onto the ground.

Thankfully, it's not a far fall at all, and my phone lands right next to me, still vibrating with the call that had spooked me. I grab it off the ground, sitting up. Not sure how, but my glasses remained on my face.

"You scared me. And it may have made me fall out of the window." Marks bursts into laughter. "It's okay. I'm fine."

"Am I really your best friend if I don't laugh?"

“Fair point.” I make myself get up, glancing around to make sure the coast is clear, but if I were busted, I’m sure it would have happened during my roll out the window. “This was your idea,” I remind her.

"You to your dock yet?"

"No, but I'm headed there." I trip over a stupid rock. The glasses that have lights on them don't sound so stupid anymore.

"Are you okay?" Marks lets out another laugh. "This might have been a bad idea."

"Oh, now that I'm out the window, you say that."

"We have to do something wild. Not as though we are having a bachelorette party."

"Did you want to go and see strippers?" I tease her. She makes a gagging sound.

"Don't you think that's cheating? I mean, you're engaged, and you let a person rub all over you?"

“Right? Just because the building is named ‘strip club’ or something similar doesn't mean you can touch others. It’s strange to me.” I admit I’m talking out of my ass. I’m in an arranged marriage.

“So it would bother you?” I stop walking. I can sense she is getting at something. I’m not sure why, because she has no clue about the Marino family. I have made sure to never say that name before.

“Are you getting at something here, Marks?” I ask her.

“It’s just—” She pauses for a long second.



I keep on moving toward the dock because I would rather not have this conversation where anyone can hear.

Which dawns on me that had been the plan from the start with Marks.

That I should get out and we could talk.

I thought maybe about sex or my soon-to-be husband and how I'm handling an arranged marriage. Or why he keeps ghosting me.

"Out with it. You're killing me here."

"I mean, do you really want to know? That's another question? You have had a crush on this man forever, but this is arranged, and he's a dick, so the rules could be different now." My heart starts to race. Marks knows something. "It might be better to not know things."

"But you know something?" It's obvious she's not telling me something, and now that she's hinted at knowing, I'm not going to be able to think about anything else until she spills what it is.

"I know lots of things."

I walk faster until I'm at the dock, and I'm sure I'm alone. "Knowing lots of things can get you into trouble, Marks," I tell her.

"When have I ever been shy about trouble?" I think it might be easier to get into trouble behind a computer screen. It's different when you're face-to-face with it. The Marinos would track her down.

"This is different. You can't be poking around in my life."

"Because you don't want me to get hurt or you don't want me to know things?"

"Of course I want you to know things!" I wish I could tell her everything. That I could confide in her. That's not the world I live in. Hence why my only friend is online.

"I know I shouldn't have poked, but you're set to marry this man. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't do some light stalking?"

"Light stalking." I snort a laugh. I didn't know there were levels. "So?" This anticipation is killing me.

"He went to a strip club that is also a known brothel." I close my eyes. I shouldn't feel the sense of betrayal that I do, but I can't help it. The way he kissed me the other day. It actually meant nothing.

"Bourbon Street?" I ask. I once heard about the place and that it's owned by the Marino family.

"Yes, and he was in there for a while."

"What's a while?"

"Hours." I swipe at the tear that escapes.

"Right." Why do I keep doing this to myself? My heart aches thinking about what he was doing in those hours.

This is what my life is going to be. I can't let my head get caught up in his kisses that make me forget everything else. I need to harden myself to him. I should really get the message because the man disappears for days!

“I’m sorry, Tova.” I can hear the defeat in her tone. “I can get you out.”

“Marks.” I let out a sigh. “There is no out. I have no choice. I have to marry him.” My phone is plucked from my fingers. I let out a small scream, spinning around to see Warren standing there.

The moon casts shadows over the hard lines of his face, making him appear harsher. Even in the dim night light, I can tell he's livid. Well, that makes two of us. What the heck does he have to be mad about?

“Give me my phone.” I hold my hand out.

“Who are you speaking to?”

“That’s none of your business.” There, I told him. Let’s see how he likes not knowing something when it comes to me.

“It is not my concern that my fiancée is secretly making midnight calls to a man who is attempting to dissuade her from our wedding.” He takes a step closer to me. I retreat backwards. His nostrils flare.

“It’s not midnight,” I say, knowing damn well that it’s going to piss him off.

“You need to be real careful right now, little mouse.”

“Why? What will you do to me?” I don’t know where the sudden bravado comes from. Actually, I do. It’s from my anger.

"Anything I want." I audibly swallow. I hate that tears burn in my eyes. I fight them with everything I have.

"Right." A humorless laugh leaves me. "Can I have my phone back?" I keep my hand out. He must have ended the call when he took the phone from me because the screen is lighting up with a call from Marks.

"Who is it?"

"It's none of your business!" I hiss at him, trying to hold on to my anger and not let sadness bleed in. Ha! Is he really pissed because he thinks I'm talking to a man? That's rich after where he spent his evening. The night before our wedding.

"You're about to make it my business."

Oh, shit. There's no doubt in my mind that Warren will without a doubt track Marks down if I don't tell him what he wants to know.

"Okay, it's my friend. A girl."

"Mark?"

"Marks," I correct him. "It's a nickname, but it is a girl. Okay?" I thrust my hand out again, but he doesn't make a move to give me the phone back. Instead, I watch as he powers my phone off before slipping it into his back pocket. "I guess I can't have anything."

"You'll get your phone back. After I check into things."

"Please don't." I step toward Warren. "Leave her out of this. She's the only friend I have."

"It's my job to protect you. You've never met this friend. She could be anyone."

"How do you know I've never met her?"

Warren is quiet for a long second. "It would have had to have been years ago." Still not sure how he could be so sure about that, but whatever.

"Please don't do this. She's my only friend." I hate how pathetic I sound.

"Whose idea was it to sneak out?"

"I'm an adult."

"So it was hers." I clench my teeth. We stare at each other, neither of us saying a word. Warren is eerily still.

"Where were you tonight?" I turn the focus back on him.

"Working."

"Really." I snort. "Whatever. I'm going to bed. I have a shitty day in front of me tomorrow; I'll need my rest for it." I go to step past Warren, but he shifts, blocking my path off the dock.

"Tova." He says my name so gently it is almost a whisper. I hate that it shakes my resolve. It's stupid, and I know that, but I can't stop it either. "If I were a better man, I'd let you go, but I'm not and I can't."

"Because of your father?" He was ordered to marry me.

"No, because of me."

"What are you saying, Warren?"

“You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go. It won’t be good for anyone if you try to run.” I cock my head to the side, staring up at him.

“You’d chase me? Threaten my parents?”

“I’ll do whatever I have to.” He leans down closer so his eyes are level with mine. “Don’t put anything between us you care about.” My heart thumps in my chest. It’s not fear I’m feeling but something else I can’t name.

“You don’t want to marry me.”

“That’s what you think?”

“That’s what I know.”

“So na?ve.” He reaches out to touch a piece of hair that escaped the messy bun I have on the top of my head. I smack his hand. His brows lift. I inhale sharply. I think I shocked us both.

“I might be na?ve,” I agree. “But don’t touch me. You won’t answer my question about where you were tonight.”

“I told you I was working.”

“With whom?”

“My brothers.”

I huff a breath. “This is pointless.” I try to walk around him again, but once again, he stops me. This time he grips my shoulders. “You’re scaring me.”

“You’re lying. You’re not scared of me.”

“Everyone is scared of you,” I tell him, but he shouldn't need that reminder. I bet even his own father has some fear of him.

“You swat at my hand and demand answers to questions. You’re not scared of me,” he repeats.

“Maybe I just know you can’t leave any marks on me. Not with our wedding tomorrow.” Warren releases his hold on me, taking a step back as though my words were a physical slap to him.

“You think I’d hit you?” His expression is one of bewilderment. Do I think that?

“I don’t know what to think of you anymore, Warren.

You confuse me.” No, I find it hard to believe that a man worried about my sunburn would lay a hand on me, but it’s also hard to believe that the same man that kissed that sunburn would disappear on me for days and then go and sleep with strippers, so what do I really know?

“Know that you’re mine. That I don’t want to ever hurt you.”

“You know some hurt is beyond physical.”

“I’m aware.” He says it as though he knows this fact but doesn’t quite understand it himself.

“Are you mine, Warren?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure about that? You didn’t belong to anyone else tonight?”

His brows pull together. “I was with my brothers tonight.”

“Working.” I roll my eyes. “Let me pass.”

“Do you know where I was this evening, little mouse?” I don’t respond because I realize the pile of crap I have now stepped in. I should have no clue where he was tonight or any night, for that matter. Warren was right. I shouldn’t even ask.

“It’s the night before your wedding. I’ve heard stories about men and strip clubs or whatever.” I shrug my shoulders, trying to pretend I don’t care.

“I was at a brothel.” He wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me flush against him. “Bourbon Street.”

Marks had already told me, but hearing it from him hurts so much more. I try to push on his chest, but it’s useless. “Let me finish.”

“No!” I fight harder, not only against his hold on me but also the way my body naturally is drawn to him. Although mad, I know being this close to him somehow still manages to weaken my resolve. I have to keep reminding myself that I need to keep some distance between us.

“Yeah, you’re really scared of me,” Warren mutters as my feet leave the ground. He lifts me up higher so we’re eye level, my feet dangling a good foot off the ground. “I went there to beat the shit out of someone for hurting one of the girls.”

“Okay.”

“That’s all I did.”



“Really?” I scoff.

“What is it you think I did, little mouse?” I narrow my eyes at him. Is he fighting a smirk? Does he think him betraying me is a joke? That I’m a joke?

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” Any humor he had in his expression melts away. Did I go too far? Too bad. I may have to fall in line and marry him, but I don’t have to keep my mouth shut.

“You’re jealous.” That sexy little smirk of his chooses to make an appearance, only heightening my agitation.

“Maybe I would rather not catch an STD.”

“I promise you. That will not be an issue.”

“You’re maddening, you know that?”

“I do tend to have that effect on people.”

“Can you put me down now?”

“I didn’t touch anyone.”

“Except that man you beat up?”

“I suppose you have me there, little mouse.” I should let it go at that, but I can’t help myself.

“Did they touch you?”

“Tova.” He softens to me. I can feel it throughout his body.

“I have never touched any of the girls who work there. I never would, and they know better than to even try it.” I search his face, hoping he’s telling me the truth.

He doesn’t have a reason to lie. No matter what, I’ll be walking down the aisle to him come tomorrow.

“Really? Never?”

“You believe I go there often?”

“I don’t know. I just thought, well, men?—”

“I’m not like a lot of men, and I don’t mean because of who I am.”

“Then what do you mean?” I stop fighting him. My hands come to rest on his shoulders. He keeps me tight in his hold, my feet still dangling. "Tell me. I'm going to be your wife tomorrow. Give me something, Warren."

"I'm sure you've noticed. People call me cold and unfeeling." I have heard those things too. But there were those rare moments I could have sworn when I'd catch him, or I thought he was watching me, that there wasn't coldness. There were small glimpses of desire and need.

"Are you?"

"Yes." He gives a small nod. "I don't think I have the same emotions as others."

"Do you love your family?"

"I don't know."

My heart sinks. "You'll never love me then."

"That's the thing, little mouse. You're different."

### Chapter Twelve

#### WARREN

I pound on my brother's bedroom door before I let myself right in. He never stays at the farm, but with the wedding tomorrow (today at this point), he decided it would be easier.

"Fuck me." Z sits up in his bed. The million screens from his computer light up the room in a blue hue. How that shit doesn't give him a headache I have no clue. "Do you sleep?"

"Not really." I walk to the end of the bed and toss Tova's phone at him. It lands in his lap. "My wife was speaking to someone named Marks on her phone. I want to know everything about this girl."

"Did you get married and I slept through it?" He grabs the phone, tossing the comforter back to get up. I ignore his question, and in Z predictability, he asks another. "Did you sneak into her room to get this?" Z plugs the phone into his computer setup.

"No, I found her at the dock using it." I knew she had a phone. Several times, I considered searching through it, but ultimately decided against it.

She was on my property, which allowed me to track her. Besides, I'm not a fan of letting anyone dig through her phone, and I knew I'd need Z's help for that. Besides, I didn't want to alert him to my obsession with Tova, but I guess I wasn't as discreet as

I thought since he already was on to me.

"Found her? You're full of shit." He shakes his head.

"You wanting those cameras and sensors down there makes sense now.

I thought you were going overboard with security around here.

Nope, you were stalking your soon-to-be wife.

" I grunt a response. "Fuck, that's weird to say.

You're about to have a wife." Z runs his hand down his face.

"You'll be next if you're not careful." Our mother has been enjoying all of this wedding stuff far too much. I overheard her talking about how a baby shower would be next. That thought should have scared the shit out of me. Yet the only thing it did was go straight to my fucking dick.

All I could think about was me being inside of Tova.

Her body swelled with my child, letting everyone know she was mine.

The thought is intoxicating. I've been fighting so long to hide my attraction to her from the world that now thinking I can have her has the most insane thoughts drifting through my mind.

"That's not happening."

I watch over my brother's shoulder as he gets the phone unlocked. "Stay out of her photos and anything else. Only focus on the Marks girl." Z nods, clicking away.

“Whatever we find stays between us.” Z turns his head to peer up at me.

“Got it,” he agrees, and I know he won’t tell a soul.

My brothers and I respect our father, but there is another loyalty between the three of us.

It runs deeper. Besides, Z has a lot of his own secrets.

He may have more of them than all of us combined.

“Wait, my brain is still booting up. Did you say Marks?”

“It’s a nickname.”

“No.” Z shakes his head. I try to follow what the hell he’s doing on the screen, but it’s impossible.

“This can’t be who I think it is.” He picks up Tova’s phone and shuffles through the apps.

“Fuck me.” Z drops the phone back down. “Your girl is using an app to make sure her texts will never be traced or pulled from the phone. Like the one I made for us.”

“The fuck?” I shake my head. “Why would she need that?”

“Or really know about it. Except you said Marks.” Z gets up from his chair, holding Tova’s phone out to me. “If it’s who I think it is, and I’m pretty damn sure it is, then we’ll find nothing on Marks.”

“Spill.” I take the phone from him.

“There isn't much to tell. I thought she might be on the younger side because I've heard her voice a few times.”

"Get to the point," I cut in.

"She's a hacker and a fucking good one."

"This hacker. You think she befriended my wife to get closer to us. To you?" The thought alone has me on edge. Thoughts of what had happened to my mom rush through my mind. A sense of rage fills me that I've never experienced before at the idea of something happening to Tova.

"I honestly have no fucking clue. I've never had a run-in with her, but I'm sure as hell going to find out."

"If this girl only befriended Tova to get to us, I want her brought to me." Z's brow lifts.

"Soon the news will spread about what Tova means to me. It's only a matter of time. Others will see this as a weak spot for me. I'm going to make it real fucking clear to everyone that if you hurt my wife, I'll be collecting in blood."

"War, she's some hacker. I don't see why she would?—"

"I don't care." I can't and won't risk anything when it comes to Tova's safety.

"I thought you wanted to clean up the family name. To go straighter?"

"I did."

"Did?" Z locks eyes with me. "Got it." He gets the message loud and clear.

"Does that bother you?" I ask. Not that it's going to change anything. I can't even control it anymore. Z thinks it over for a second.

"That you'll burn it all down for her alone?" I hadn't gone that deep in those thoughts. I only knew that I would choose Tova every time. "Tova is a sweet girl."

"Don't." How the fuck would he know how sweet she is? He doesn't.

"Hey." He barks a laugh, shaking his head. "I was only going to say I think everyone is safe as long as they don't go after your wife. And she's sweet, so I don't think she'll send her dragon after people."

"Dragon?"

"Yeah, because you'll burn down the city." I suppose I would if I was trying to find her or someone touched her.

"My thoughts aren't rational when it comes to her," I tell my brother. Who the fuck else can I talk to about it?

"Yeah, I'm getting that, but you've always been the obsessive type when it comes to things and tasks." I have. "Not a person, though."

She's not just a person. In my mind, she is much bigger than that. The more time I spend with her, the closer she lets me get, the stronger those feelings are becoming. I'm finding my thoughts and possessiveness know no bounds when it comes to her.

I wasn't lying to my little mouse. She should be very careful about putting anything between us.

My father is playing a dangerous game... We might all lose in the end.



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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:39 pm*

### Chapter Thirteen

TOVA

Y ou're different.

I can't stop thinking about those two words.

I'm not sure what to make of them. Then again, it's difficult to read Warren.

I make up my own narratives in my mind about him.

I'm always trying to make them sweet. I should really lay off of the romance books because Warren was right: I am na?ve, especially when it comes to him.

I turn my head slightly to peek over at my now husband. This whole thing has been a whirlwind since I woke up this morning. We'd been going nonstop. The next thing I knew, I was walking down the aisle to Warren. I was thankful the vows were short and to the point.

When Warren leaned in for the kiss, he surprised me by only kissing the side of my mouth.

It felt awkward when everyone clapped for us.

There were about fifty people at the wedding.

I didn't know anyone except for Warren's family and my own.

I was thrilled to see Cosima, Warren's sister.

I don't think she's been back in over a year.

"Yes, I'm still staring." Warren catches me sneaking a peek over at him.

"Why?"

"Because I won't be able to when we enter the reception." We're waiting to be formally introduced as a married couple. Everyone is taking their seats now.

Giant tents have been put up for the reception.

They sure as heck don't appear like tents.

Inside, chandeliers hang from the ceilings, and flowers coat everything.

They've made them look like fancy ballrooms. I haven't a clue how our moms and Warren put this all together in such a short time.

I guess when the sky's the limit when it comes to money, there aren't any obstacles to get in your way.

"Is it forbidden?" I tease.

Warren's arm is around my waist. He guides me to face him, his hold tightening around me. Our bodies are pressed together.

"It should be forbidden." Warren leans down, pressing his mouth to mine.

At first it's only a brush, but it quickly changes.

My fingers dig into the front of his suit as he deepens the kiss, his tongue thrusting into my mouth.

I let out a small moan that he matches with his own groan.

When he lifts his head, I gasp to catch my breath.

The last few times he's kissed me, I felt this greedy possessiveness coming from him.

Warren might not be giving me words of love, but the way he kisses me says a lot on its own.

"I'm not forbidden anymore."

"You're my wife." His eyes appear a darker blue. His eyes also convey a sense of possessiveness.

"Are you okay?" I find myself asking him.

"Are you worried about me?"

"I suppose. If you drop dead, they might make me marry Ronan or Z next," I say with a laugh. Warren's hold on me turns rigid. A coldness ripples down my spine. "I was joking."

"Don't," he clips, releasing me from his tight hold.

"Warren." He takes my hand.

“It’s time.” He nods toward where two men are waiting to open the doors for us to enter.

“But—” I try to explain.

“We’ll discuss this later.”

“Right.” Because we do everything on his terms. How could I forget? God forbid I try to apologize on my own terms.

The two men pull back the curtains for us to enter. Everyone stands up and claps. It’s awkward, and I fight not to fidget and keep my chin up. Warren guides me over to our table, pulling out a chair for me. I give my mom a reassuring smile.

When the champagne glass in front of me is filled, I pick it up and take a big sip. Warren releases my hand, moving his to my thigh under the table. It’s an innocent touch, but it makes warmth bloom deep in my stomach, remembering that day in his office. How he’d made me come against the door.

That had been another one of those times Warren felt greedy for me. It made me feel powerful and sexy. He has a way of doing that, but then it slips through my fingers, making me wonder if I’d imagined it all.

"When they're done with the toasts, their attention will turn to the booze and food," Warren says next to my ear. I again peek over at him.

"We'll have to do the cake and dance stuff too. Right?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Really?"

"I'll tell them all to fuck off." And they would without question.

"You can't tell our mothers to fuck off."

Warren's expression says otherwise. He would do exactly that.

"Please do not speak to my mom that way or yours, for that matter."

"Then I won't."

"It's that simple?" I ask.

"Generally. I can be reasonable."

"Oh, really?" A small laugh leaves me.

"I try, but I suppose I'm not fully reasonable with you."

"Because I'm different?"

"You are."

"Sometimes I don't know whether you're being a jerk or sweet." I've found that it's easier to just say how I'm feeling when it comes to Warren.

"Which would you prefer?" His lips twitch, and I swear he almost smirked. Almost.

"Sweet." I nudge him with my elbow. Warren grips my chin, turning me to fully face him.

"Are you sure, little mouse?" There is that glint in his eyes. It only stokes the heat

building in my core. I swallow. Do I enjoy it when he's a jerk? It does drive me crazy, but that doesn't mean I hate it.

"I—" Thankfully, Warren's mom interrupts me, speaking over everyone to get their attention. I had no clue how to respond to his question because I'm not sure of the answer myself.

"You're saved for now ," Warren says, releasing his hold on my chin. When I glance back out to the crowd, I notice everyone is watching us and not Rochelle, who has started a toast. There is a mix of expressions from everyone. Even Warren's sister, Cosima, is studying the two of us.

A few more people stand up to give us well wishes. I sip on my champagne. It slowly starts to relax me.

"What will it be?" Warren asks as they start to serve dinner. "I had them make sure the ceremony was quick for you."

"You did?"

Warren shrugs. "I know this isn't what you wanted.

" I glance down at my lap. That's not true.

At least at one time this had been a dream of mine.

"But if you wish, one day I'll give you the wedding you deserve.

" I nod, choked with emotion. These are the little things he says that pull me into him.

That make me think my first instincts about him weren't wrong.

“We’ll do the cake and dance.” I pick up my glass and take another sip.

“Eat if you’re going to keep drinking.”

“Are you always going to boss me around?”

“When it comes to your well-being, I can fix it.” Warren picks up his fork and knife, cutting a piece of the steak and bringing it to my mouth. I part my lips and take the bite. Warren's eyes soften around the sides. He feeds me another bite and then another.

"War." An old man in a fancy suit comes to stand in front of our table. He's got streaks of gray through his black hair. It makes his flushed red nose and cheeks appear brighter. "I missed the engagement party. I apologize."

"It's fine." Warren doesn't spare the man a glance, only feeding me another bite.

"Your bride?—"

"Is trying to eat her dinner."

The older man's overgrown brows lift. I want to sink back in my chair because this is awkward, but it doesn't faze Warren.

"My apologies."

"It's okay," I tell him. Warren finally turns his head toward the man.

"My wife is polite. It is not okay. We will greet our guests after dinner." The man's cheeks somehow manage to flush more. I'm sure mine aren't doing much better.

The man stumbles over his words before fleeing our table. Again, people are watching us. Even my parents.

"That was harsh," I say under my breath, not wanting others to hear.

"That was far from harsh."

"Okay, it was rude."

"It was rude of him to disturb us while we enjoyed our wedding dinner."

I snort a laugh. "I don't know if you're teasing me or not."

"I'll pick whichever made you laugh."

"You can be charming when you want." I start to lift my hand to touch his cheek but stop myself.

"Touch me." I let my fingers trail down his jaw before I cup it. I can feel the roughness of his beard trying to come through. He must have shaved a few hours ago because normally by this time of day he'd have a five o'clock shadow.

Warren leans into my touch.

"Holy shit," Cosima whispers loudly. Her eyes are wide, fixed on us. I drop my hand. "Sorry." She sinks back in her chair. Z chuckles, draping his arm over the back of her chair.

I can sense the shift in Warren next to me, a cold wall coming down hard all around him, taking away all the warmth he was giving me.



### Chapter Fourteen

#### WARREN

It's impossible to be near her and not touch her. I know she hates the attention. In my years of watching Tova, I have observed that she can be shy until she gets to know someone. I hate that I have to put her through this spectacle. That's what this is. It's all for a fucking show.

We cut the cake, and this time she feeds me a bite. I have never been one for sweets, but the buttercream of the icing tastes different when Tova brings another bite to my mouth. I greedily take it, wanting to make her happy.

"Do you want to leave after our dance?" I ask Tova.

My father, I'm sure, would prefer that I make a few rounds to mingle and be courteous, but at this point I couldn't care less. I'm still pissed that he'd invited some of these people.

Tova looks like a damn dream. Her wedding dress is breathtaking.

Her shoulders are bare, except for delicate straps that sweep across her upper arms. The top part appears to be a corset with tiny buttons in the back.

It molds to her body, accentuating her curves.

The creamy white lace with lace flowers that go all the way down to the floor gives it

a timeless look.

It's as though it were made with her in mind.

When she walks, I swear she looks as though she's floating.

I'm not sure how I managed to prevent myself from walking down the aisle and meeting her midway. Yes, I do. All the peering eyes, all pretending to be friends when they are not. I also wanted to allow her father to walk her down.

I don't know if having her father walk her down the aisle was a dream of hers. I know she's close to her parents. This isn't the wedding she wanted, but I could try and make it bearable for her. This whole day has been bittersweet.

My fingers brush up her back, grazing the buttons of the dress. Will she need my help taking it off? I see Tova's father heading toward us.

"Need an answer, little mouse. Your father is closing in. Do I tell him to fuck off?"

"No." Her lips turn up into a smirk. "Be nice."

"I only have to be nice to you."

"Well, be nice for me." She peers at me through her lashes. "Please."

"For you," I agree. "Corbin," I greet him when he reaches us on the dance floor.

"Would you mind if I cut in?" I do mind.

"No, Dad. I'd love that," Tova says before I can say anything.

I nod reluctantly, letting her go. I don't get far before my mom is asking for a dance.

I do it because it will not only make her happy but it will also piss my father off.

He's waiting to get me alone to have a few words.

I'm not interested in talking shop tonight.

"Are you enjoying the wedding?" my mom asks with a coy smile.

She knows I'm not, but I know how to rub elbows when I must. Tonight I'm finding I don't have my normal tolerance.

If anything, I'm growing more irritated as the seconds tick by.

Even when I'm not near Tova, they all still watch her. It makes me uneasy.

"I'd enjoy it more if it ended."

Mom laughs. "Soon." She beams up at me. "You need to relax. Everything is going to be fine." Her expression turns serious. "If you focus on everything else around you and not her, you'll lose her."

"She's all I can focus on," I say before I can think better of it.

"I know." She pats my chest. "I only want you to be mindful. She's sweeter than I was. I grew up in this world."

"And that is the very problem." I keep my voice low, not wanting anyone to overhear us. Tova has a sweetness to her that I don't want her to lose. If this lifestyle hardened her in any way, it would break me. I would never want that for her. That's the reason

I stayed away to begin with.

“You have always been different, War. It worried me.” I knew that. I was far too observant as a child. “You can be so much like your father at times, and at others, nothing like him at all.”

“Should I be offended?” I’m not, but I want to know what she is getting at.

“Different isn’t always bad, you know.”

“I suppose.”

“Your father was a whore. Did you know that?” My brows lift. “Of course you did.” She lets out a low laugh, shaking her head. “Before me. Then he fell on his ass when I came into his life.”

“That he did.” I have never heard of my father stepping out on my mother. He loves her, and she’d also cut his throat while he slept if he even thought about it.

I never understood how dimwitted a man needs to be to mistreat his wife and then lie next to her and sleep at night. Not only that—women are cunning and patient. They will bide their time. Do not underestimate a woman's wrath. It’s not if it will come but when.

“He knew what I was to him from the start. I think you also knew who Tova was from the start.” She eyes me in a way only a mother ever could.

I give a slight nod, my eyes drifting once again over my mother's head to Tova. Her father spins her in a circle, making her giggle. “Then it doesn’t matter.”

“What?” I ask, dragging my attention away from my wife.

I'm not sure my fingers could even get the delicate buttons of her dress off.

I'd ruin it. I couldn't just replace it.

She had made it her own, sewing pockets into the sides.

They are hardly noticeable, but I knew she would put her own spin on it, and I was looking for them.

Since it's partly her creation, there will be no ripping of the buttons.

"This is what I mean." Mom glances over toward Tova. "It doesn't matter. It's too late. There is no fighting what you feel for her."

"I'm not fighting that." I lost that battle long ago. Not sure you could even call it a battle.

"Then what? I see you too in these moments, and then you go cold on her."

"I didn't?—"

Mom holds up a finger to silence me. "I wasn't done." I keep my mouth shut. Especially now that my wife is watching me dance with my mom with a smile on her face. If I pissed my mother off, Tova would notice, and then that smile might fade away. "You avoid her for days."

"It's for her own good," I say too defensively. Tova has to think I'm some beast at this point. I'm always pouncing on her one way or another.

I didn't mean to be harsh when I stalked her down at the dock. I was worried. She can't go slipping out at night all alone. I don't care if it was still on our land.

“Is it because, as I said, it doesn’t matter? You’re done for. Fighting that will only hurt her.” My mom goes to step back, but I stop her.

“Why?” I don’t mean to hurt her. I prefer when she smiles at me. I don’t mind when she rolls her eyes at me either. It’s rather adorable. It’s the tears that irk me. They get under my skin and make me want to do whatever it takes to make them stop. To make sure she’s never sad because of me.

“Oh, you want advice now?” She smirks. It’s playful.

“Mom.”

“No girl wants the man she is to marry to avoid her. Ignore her. Do better.”

“I promise you. I have never ignored her.” Ignoring her is an impossible task. Fruitless. “She was forced to marry me.”

My mom throws back her head and laughs. “How are you men so brilliant at times and utterly stupid at others?”

“It’s a gift,” I reply with a hint of sarcasm.

“That girl loves you.”

My feet stop moving. The music doesn’t. It is not until this moment that I realize how badly I want that to be true. “She doesn’t.”

“She does.”

“She cried when she found out she had to marry me.”

“You should ask her about it, then.”

“It’s far too late for that.” The gold band on my finger is proof of that.

“It’s never too late.” Mom pats my cheek twice before stepping away.

I watch Tova along with everyone else as her father spins her again.

The flame of jealousy burns inside of me. It’s always there when it comes to Tova. Even watching her smile at her father stokes the flame. It could be the flowers she’s stroking or the bite of cake she moans around as she eats.

I envy them all.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### TOVA

“Y our dress is beautiful.” Cosima takes Warren’s empty chair next to me. He’s greeting and talking to guests. It stung that he hadn’t asked me to join him. Does he not want to introduce me to them? Is he embarrassed?

“Thanks.” I give her a smile. “Yours is beautiful too.” Cosima has on a deep purple dress that hugs her curves. With her blonde hair, every color works on her.

“This old thing.” She playfully bats her lashes as she snags Warren’s glass of champagne that has been left untouched since it was poured. I lost count of how many I’ve had at this point. “Z told me it was ugly.”

“Really?” Z, out of all the Marino males, tends to be fairly nice. He doesn't have that grumpy scowl that I’m pretty sure is inherited. I glance down at him and see that he is, in fact, scowling at Cosima. “He’s protective?”

“He’s something all right.” She rolls her eyes, taking a sip of the champagne. I do the same, sinking back into my chair. “So you two finally tied the knot.”

“Finally?” What is she talking about? This was the world's quickest engagement. Cosima shrugs.

"The way he watches you." A whimsical expression falls across her face.



This isn't a fairy tale. She knows that better than me.

My father has always been a part of this world, but we lived on the outside edge of it.

It's only these past few years I've gotten a real understanding of the power the Marino family has.

"You think he watches me?" I search War out in the room. When my eyes land on him, he is staring right at me. His father is next to him with two other men in suits, all talking, but he doesn't give them his eyes. He's fully focused on me.

"It's not just the watching. It's how he watches you."

"It's possessive," I add.

" Really possessive. It's interesting. I mean, sure, my brother can be territorial, but this is different."

There's that word again. Different. If only I knew exactly what that means when it comes to War and me.

A server comes by, filling our glasses again. Cosima doesn't get a chance to take another drink because Z is there taking the glass from her.

"Hey!" she huffs, jumping to her feet. Cosima teeters in her heels. She has to be tipsy because I've seen her rock heels by the freaking pool before like it was nothing.

"You've had enough."

"I can drink if I want."

“You’re not in Europe, so no, you can’t,” he fires back at her. Z is pissed. What has him all riled up? It can’t really be Cosima drinking, can it?

“Oh, because all of a sudden we are a law-abiding family?” Cosima throws her head back and laughs. It only pisses Z off more.

“You’re done for the night.” He grabs her arm.

“You’re not the boss of me!” Cosima fires back at him. My eyes bounce between the two of them. Cosima can be feisty at times, but this is different.

“You have no idea.” He tugs her along. She appears to reluctantly go with him, but when she peeks over her shoulder at me, she gives me a wicked look, letting me know she was poking at Z on purpose. At least that was entertaining. I pick up my glass and finish it off.

When I search the room again for Warren, I see he is now talking to an older lady and two girls a bit older than me.

“I’ll just sit here all alone,” I mutter to myself. Or I won’t. Who says I have to stay here? I can do things. What things? I’m not sure, but there has to be something. When I glance back across the room and Warren is still in conversation, his eyes not on me, I know this is my chance.

It’s childish, I know, but I also know he’ll be all pissy when he can’t find me. He’ll stalk me down. Why did last night piss me off, but right now it sounds rather fun?

“Whoa,” I whisper to myself when I stand. I am a tad unsteady on my feet, but I don’t have heels on. My dress hides that I’m wearing a pair of flats.

“Mrs. Marino, is there something you need?” a man dressed in an all-black suit asks.

“Me?” I point to myself.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Right.” I snap my fingers. “That is me.” The man nods. “I have gotta pee,” I lie. He’s security. I know I have seen him around here before. Was he stationed next to me? At this point I wouldn’t put it past Warren.

“You have to head to the main house for the restroom.”

“Thanks.” I stick to the outside of the tented area, trying to blend in. It’s not helpful when everyone says hi to me while I pass. I smirk when I make it out of the tent without being caught.

“Mrs. Marino. This way.” I spin around to see the same man.

“You followed me.”

“I did.”

“And you’re not going to stop, are you?”

“I have my orders.”

“If I’m ‘Mrs. Marino’”—I make air quotes with my fingers when I say my name—“then can I do some ordering around here?”

“They won’t override War’s.”

“So if I wanted to order Chinese food and he wanted to order Mexican, he always wins?” I throw my hands up in the air.

“Why would you order takeout? Marcello is one of the best chefs.”

“Touché.” He has a point. I quickly come up with a new plan as I make my way toward the main house. The man even follows me into the house, lingering outside of the bathroom. I lock the door before I go straight for the window.

It takes me a second to get the window up, but I manage to pull it off.

Sadly, I’m as good at sneaking out of this window as I was the other night.

So needless to say, I take a tumble, rolling and landing flat on my back.

Don’t judge me. I mean, I’m in a damn wedding dress; I was bound to fall.

I decide to just lie here, even though I know my dress is probably getting dirty.

I stare up at the night sky. You can always see all the stars out here.

“You’re going to be a handful.”

“Holy craptickle!” I scream, sitting up. Warren looms over me. “Do you have me LoJacked?”

“Thinking about it.” Warren leans down, plucking me off the ground like I weigh nothing.

“Why are you always showing off your muscles?”

“What?” He barks a laugh.

“Nothing.” I wave him off. “Put me on my feet.”

“It might be safer if I don’t.”

“Fine, at least carry me bride-style.”

“Bride-style?” He lifts a brow at me, making me smile.

“You’re handsome when you’re not mad.” I cup his cheek with my hand.

“Is that so?”

I let out a loud sigh. “It doesn’t matter, though. You’re always handsome.” I roll my eyes. A full-on smile spreads across Warren’s face. Okay, that’s the hottest expression I’ve ever seen. “Bride-style me. You know, like you’re carrying me over the threshold.”

“Got it.” He shifts me in his arms so that I’m cradled against him. I lean in, placing a kiss on his cheek.

“You shouldn’t sneak out without telling me.” Here we go again.

“Well, you shouldn’t leave me alllll alone to hang out with other women,” I huff, running my fingers along the buttons of his shirt.

“I had to go rub elbows.”

“Well, aren’t you supposed to be rubbing me?” Warren’s hold on me tightens.

“I was saving you from the agony of it. It had to be done.” He lets out a sigh, and I know it’s the last thing he wanted to do.

“It’s a part of this whole charade.”

“You’re not a charade. That was why I didn’t drag you with me.”

“As opposed to carrying me?”

“As opposed to carrying you,” he agrees. “I didn’t want to leave you alone. I would have rather spent my time with you.”

“Really?” I perk up. “I thought you were avoiding me.”

“I avoid you because I maul you like an animal.”

“That was one time!” I hold up my finger. “And I liked it.” I wiggle my brows at him. “Wait, where are we going?” I hadn’t realized we were moving.

"To our living quarters."

"Whoa, I think you're getting ahead of yourself here," I tease. I'm pretty sure everyone knows what we'll be doing tonight. The idea of sex with Warren doesn't scare me. No, I've had many fantasies about him over the years. The only man I have ever had them about.

"It is where you'll be staying from this point on."

"I was teasing."

"I'm not."

"Hey." I poke his cheek. "Go back to not being so serious."

"For you, I'll try."

I'll take it... and him too.

### Chapter Sixteen

#### WARREN

She's drunk. It's not optimal, but it's understandable. I'm actually enjoying how it's making her very chatty and open with me. My mother's words of telling me to speak with Tova push to the forefront of my mind. Now would be the time.

It's a dick move of me to use this vulnerable moment, but I have never claimed to be a good man. In fact, I'm finding I'll break every law or code I live by when it comes to my little wife.

"Oopsie," Tova exclaims loudly as she unfastens one of the buttons on my shirt. Her fingers go for another. I don't think it was really an oopsie.

Tova's cheeks are more flushed than normal. Some of her freckles showing through the makeup she had done for the wedding. Her lips are parted enough that I can see her little pink tongue as she works to get another button loose.

Tova's sweet naïveté shimmers around her. She is not made for my world. It has not hardened her. Her face always shows every emotion she has. Even when she tries to hide them.

It's part of why I decided not to drag her around the reception room to meet all the guests. I should have told my father to fuck off, but I thought it might give me time to cool down. I also wanted to give Tova a chance to mingle with her parents and catch up with my younger sister.



I needed the distraction to get my mind off the wedding night. The second the doors opened to reveal my bride, all I could think about was getting her all alone for myself. I wanted to find all the freckles she tries to hide.

"Wait. Where are we?" I entered through a side door, not wanting to be stopped or seen. I need to be left alone with my wife. My only thought was how to quickly get her back to our room, away from everything else.

"This is my living quarters." The house is expansive, featuring various sections. I have double doors that lead into mine. It has a living area connected to the main bedroom. There is a second, smaller bedroom. Despite its intended use as a nursery, it remains empty. I had no use for it.

This is my own space away from everything else. The family doesn't stay here often anymore.

"It's so brown." Her nose scrunches. I take in the space. There are wood floors along with some creamish-brown furniture. "And gray." Tova wiggles for me to put her down.

I reluctantly but gently put her on her feet. "You can change whatever you like. I don't care."

Tova taps her finger to her lips as she thinks this over. "So I could paint the walls pink? Or get wallpaper with flowers?"

"I don't give a shit." I shrug. Why do I give a fuck what color the walls are? If it makes her happy and her ass is in this bed every night, I'll paint them myself.

I watch as she starts to explore, her wedding dress trailing behind her. "What's this?" She pokes her head into the spare empty room.

“It can be whatever you like.”

“A sewing room.”

“If you wish.”

“Wait! This is for a nursery.” She spins around to face me. The smile on her face drops, her brows pulling together in thought before her eyes go round. “We’re going to make babies.”

“One day.” Not sure how it’s possible, but her cheeks flush more. I walk over and unclip the veil that’s in the back of her hair.

“I wore it up so it wouldn’t distract you.”

“It’s not only the hair that is distracting.” I let the veil fall to the floor, going for the clip next. With one click, all her wild curls fall freely around her face.

“I might need help with the dress too.” Tova turns to give me her back. All those damn buttons.

“The buttons are small.”

“It’s fine if you break one. Not like I’ll wear it again.”

“You added the pockets.”

Tova peeks over her shoulder at me. “You noticed them?”

“I don’t miss much when it comes to you, little mouse.”

She gives me a cheeky smile.

“It is a beautiful dress.” It’s her that makes the dress so appealing. “There you go,” I say when the last one is free. Tova turns back to face me, holding the dress up with her arm.

“I’m just going to do it while I’m feeling a bit more bold.” I don’t get a chance to ask what she means before she lets her arm fall free. The dress drops, pooling around her feet. Holy shit, she’s trying to kill me.

I audibly swallow as I take her in. My wife stands in front of me in only a pair of silky white panties and her wedding ring. She’s breathtaking, a fever dream. One I never want to wake up from.

Blood thumps through my body and straight to my already hard cock. Fucking hell, she’s more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. A goddess. One that I would be more than willing to fall to my knees in front of and worship happily.

Tova’s breasts are high and firm with dusty pink nipples. Her stomach is soft, sloping into her rounded hips. Ones I want to grab on to, sinking my fingers in while I pull her into me.

I have been asking myself what it is about my Tova that drew me to her from the very start. Why is she so different? Why does the sight of her spark parts of me alive that I didn’t know were there?

My conclusion is it’s simply her. I’m drawn to her, and trying to resist is a fight I will no longer have with myself. I shuck my suit jacket off, letting it hit the floor before I undo the rest of the buttons on my shirt.

Tova’s little pink tongue darts out as I step closer to her, pulling my shirt the rest of

the way off. “I’ve wondered about your tattoos.” My abs flex when her finger traces the one on my left side.

It’s strange being touched so much. I’m not used to having someone be so free with touching me. It normally would irritate me, but I want to pull her in closer. I want all her touches for the rest of my life. To experience all of our firsts together.

“Maybe you can explore them another night.” I drape the buttoned-up shirt around her.

“What are you doing?” she asks but slips her arms in, and I button it back up.

“You’re drunk, Tova. We can’t take things further.”

“I don’t like when you call me Tova. Sounds weird.” She wrinkles her nose. “Wait. Are you saying no sex?” Her brow furrows as though she’s disappointed.

“No sex.” But fuck, do I want to.

“But I shaved my vagina.” I don’t know how the hell I manage to keep a straight face. She’s adorable. A word that didn’t exist in my vocabulary until her. “And now you’re not even going to see it. I did all of that for nothing.”

“You want me to see it, little mouse?”

“Maybe a little.” A small huff leaves her. “You know what? Never mind.” She spins around, I’m sure to flee. Soon she will see that never works. This time I don’t have to chase. Her feet tangle in the dress pooled around her.

A small scream leaves her, and I quickly scoop her into my arms before she can hit the floor. “You can open your eyes.” I have her cradled in my arms again. She pops

one open.

“You caught me.”

“I did.” I carry her over to the bed, laying her down. She scoots up to lean against the headboard.

“You sure you don’t want to see it?” Her fingers drift up her bare thigh as she parts them slightly. The shirt I put on her has bunched around her waist, giving me a view of her panties.

My breathing grows heavy. “Little mouse.” I try to warn her, but I know it’s useless. My new wife lives to push my buttons and test my control.

“A tiny peek.” I reach down, grabbing her ankle, needing to touch her. “That’s not a no.”

“Would it matter what I said?” She twitches her nose, tapping her finger to her lips as though she’s thinking. We both already know her answer.

“Nope!” She smirks, leaning forward. Tova wiggles her finger for me to come closer. “Unless it’s anal,” she whispers. “I’m not doing that if you ask.”

“Is that so?” I have never thought about fucking anyone in the ass before, but now she’s put the idea into my head, I want to touch and taste every part of her. That includes her ass.

“I think you do that at like three years married.”

“Three?” Where the hell did she come up with that number?

“I don’t know. I might have made it up.” Tova leans in more, brushing her lips over mine, taking what she wants. I indulge her, unable to resist even though I should. Tova’s tongue strokes against mine, a small moan leaving her.

“You win.” I groan, breaking the kiss.

“Really?” She beams up at me. “I’ve seduced you.” I can tell she is rather proud of herself.

“Lean back,” I order her, but I’m already gently pushing her shoulder back. “Undo the buttons.” I’d only buttoned a couple of them. Her tiny fingers quickly undo them, pushing the shirt open, revealing her rosy pink nipples.

Tova lies there sweetly watching me. Always so curious when it could put her in danger.

I remove my shoes and loosen my belt, but I will keep my pants on.

They must remain in place, or I risk crossing a line.

Tova licks her lips, causing me to imagine what it will feel like to have them wrapped around my cock one day.

I push her legs apart, making room for myself. My hands go to her hips to stroke up her soft silky skin to her tits. I cup one in each hand as I lean in. Her scent surrounds me, making my mouth water. I have to taste her. There is no going back.

I suck her hard little nipple into my mouth. Tova shudders a breath. I circle it with my tongue before moving my mouth to the other to give it the same attention.

"Yes," Tova moans, her back arching to try and get more of her tit into my mouth.

Her hand instinctively comes down to tangle her fingers in my hair.

I trail my mouth farther down her body, lingering on her stomach. The image of her round with our child flashes through my mind. A tidal wave of protectiveness rolls through me.

My fingers skim the top of her panties. As badly as I want to take them off, I refrain, finding some semblance of control left, but I know it won't last forever.

Instead, I dip my fingers into her panties, tugging them to the side to reveal her glistening bare folds.

Her tiny clit is barely poking out, begging for attention.

The sight and smell of her pussy makes my balls ache.

The need for release is thumping through me, but I ignore it and everything else.

There is only my wife and the pleasure I'm going to give her.

I need to make her crave more. To become addicted to me, the same way I am to her.

I use my tongue to spread her open and groan when her flavor hits my tongue. Another need comes rushing forward, and I don't fight this one. I bury my face in her cunt, wanting her juices to coat my face. To have her perfect pussy put its scent and mark all over me.

Tiny, sexy moans leave her. "Warren." Her hips start to writhe when I suck her clit into my mouth, my tongue flicking back and forth while still suckling on her. "Warren, oh, oh."

She shakes her head back and forth, and I know she's close. I reach up with both hands and grab hers, her fingers entwined with mine. Her grip tightens on me, and I know she's there.

I watch as her breath hitches, and Tova's back arches off the bed as she cries out her release. I can't stop. I should probably give her time, but I can't. I eat her through the orgasm and greedily into another.

When I lift my head, Tova's breasts are rising and falling with her gasps, and a soft smile is on her lips. Her cheeks are even rosier than before. Slowly her eyes flutter open, and her smile grows bigger.

"That was—" She licks her bottom lip, a shyness suddenly taking over. I give her hips a tug to pull her farther down the bed and off the headboard she'd been slightly leaning up against as she watched me eat her cunt.

"That was what?" I encourage, coming up over her.

"There isn't a word for it." Her fingers brush down my jaw. "Festive."

"Festive?" I bark a laugh.

"I don't know." She shrugs. "I lit up like all the Christmas lights in the world."

I always wondered if I would know love in my life. If it were even possible for me to feel that emotion.

I know without a doubt that I most assuredly can. I love my wife. Now I have to figure out how to get her to love me back.



### Chapter Seventeen

#### TOVA

When I wake up, it takes me a second to remember where I am. I sit up, glancing around the room. The other side of the bed is empty. There is no sign of my husband. It still feels a bit surreal that I have a husband. I mean, I never even had a boyfriend before.

That should probably piss me off, but I'm too smitten to care. I made a fool of myself last night and have a slight headache. It was totally worth it.

I wasn't sure how my wedding night would go. Was last night the typical idea of a perfect wedding night? I'm guessing not. I mean, I still have my V-card. But this marriage is far from typical.

Warren gave me a taste of the kind of husband he will be. I gave him a taste too. I fall back onto the bed, covering my face with my hands. I can't believe I got naked and then complained he wasn't going to see the shave job I'd given myself.

He went and got himself a front row seat to see it. Warren crashed the stage. I snort a laugh, sitting back up. I notice a glass of water and a couple of pills on the nightstand next to the bed.

I smile, remembering how after I passed out from the two orgasms he'd given me, I'd awoken to Warren washing my face off with a cloth.

Then he had me drink water and take a couple of pills.

I might have dozed off after crawling on top of him.

That's the last that I can recall. I don't remember him complaining about it, but things got a bit hazy.

Snagging the pills off the table, I take them and gulp the water down before making my way to the bathroom.

"This place is massive," I mutter to myself. You'd think we were in a condo, not just the corner of this giant house. When I catch sight of myself in the mirror, I know I need a shower. It is only when I am exiting the shower that I remember I do not have any clothing here.

I decide I'll steal a shirt from Warren's closet.

It's massive too. Bigger than my freaking bedroom.

There is even a sitting area and some kind of dresser island in the center.

It doesn't go unnoticed that more than half of it is empty.

All of his clothes and items are organized and put away in one corner.

Is it always this way, or did he make room for me?

If he did make room, how much clothing does the man think I own?

He hung it up. I walk over to the wedding dress that is now hanging in the closet. Warren had been worried about it last night. He noticed I put sneaky pockets into it.

They weren't visible unless you were looking for them or I had my hands in them.

My new husband is rather interesting with the details he does notice, but somehow other things fly right past him.

I'm realizing the things that do kinda go over his head center around emotions and feelings.

Just like now. I bet he has no clue it might be rude for me to wake up alone the night after our wedding, or maybe that's secretly what I'm hoping.

That Warren is inexperienced in the emotional department the same way I am in other things. Hopefully time will help.

Deciding on one of the button-up black shirts, I put it on.

I need clean panties and my glasses. I fell asleep with my contacts in.

I steal a pair of his socks too before leaving the bedroom.

I'm not sure where the hell I'm going. I pass a line of boxes in the hallway.

I nosily want to peek inside but control myself.

"Mrs. Marino." One of Warren's men gives me a nod as I pass.

"Morning." I give him a smile. It's going to take time getting used to being called Mrs. anything.

"Mrs. Marino!" Chef Marcello exclaims when I enter the kitchen. Everyone around here is going to make sure I get my new name drilled into my head, clearly. "I have

some pastries set out and juice. Would you like me to make you breakfast?" he offers.

"Oh no. This is fine." I'm good with a Pop-Tart or bowl of cereal in the morning. I was actually going to shuffle through the kitchen and out the back patio door to my house. Wait, it's not my house anymore.

"We do have a variety of"—Marcello pauses as if in pain—"Pop-Tarts and sugar cereals if you prefer, but these are our homemade fresh Pop-Tarts." He pushes a plate toward me. "Notice how the whole thing is frosted evenly."

"They look wonderful." I pick one up and take a bite. A small moan leaves me when the cherry filling and smooth sugary icing hit my tongue. "You've ruined me for Pop-Tarts."

"Good." He gives a curt, satisfied nod. I don't miss the small smirk either. I lean over the kitchen island to grab the juice.

"Tova!" I snap back at the sound of my name and see my husband standing in the kitchen entryway. He is accompanied by a man I have previously seen on the property. A lot of men come and go, but I've never had a conversation with any of them. I was told to ignore them. It felt rude, and more so now.

"You scared me."

"Go," he orders the man next to him, who disappears without a word. I notice that everyone scatters. The man can clear a room.

"Are you a grumpy morning person?"

"A word." He doesn't wait for me to respond to his request. He merely takes my hand, leading me out of the kitchen and toward the front of the house.

His hold on my hand doesn't release until I'm in his office with the door shut.

"You are not allowed to leave our bedroom without clothes on." I furrow my eyebrows, looking down at the clothes I'm wearing.

"I have clothes on." I rolled up the sleeves of the shirt to my wrists, and the hem drops almost to my knees. Paired with the oversized socks, and all you can see is part of my legs. "It's a dress."

His only response is to lift the shirt. "Hey!" I squeak, pushing it back down.

"You have panties on."

"Yeah." He settles some. "I was going to go home and?—"

"You are home." I skip right over that. It's a moot point.

"And get clean panties."

"And a bra if you're going to roam around." I grab my boobs.

"Are they bad?" Now I'm self-conscious.

"Bad is far from what they are."

"Oh." I drop my hands.

"I had your things brought here and had them left outside our quarters so as not to disrupt you."

"You packed up my stuff?"

“With the help of your mother.” Thank God.

"Wait, as in you packed it or sent some of your men?"

"Your mother and I." I want to cringe thinking about Warren shoving my childhood stuffed animals into boxes.

Every girl has period panties, right? I hope my mom handled that part. I suppose it doesn't matter. He can't break up with me, but he could get the ick. It's still kind of sweet that he'd gone and packed it up himself. I'm sure he had his men bring the boxes.

We stand there in silence. I'm not really sure what to say. “You didn't have a problem last night with me seeing you.” Warren steps closer, his hands going to the outside of my thighs, his fingers traveling up.

“Do we have to talk about that?” I can feel heat rushing to my face, and as his touch gets higher and higher, that heat is rushing to other places as well.

“We can talk about whatever you like.” He grips my ass, lifting me up. Warren walks over to his desk, sitting me down on it before dropping into his chair. “How are you feeling this morning?”

"I had a slight headache, but it's gone. Thanks for the pills and water."

"No need to thank me for taking care of you." Warren gently holds one of my ankles, his thumb softly stroking back and forth. "You showered."

"Yeah." I run my fingers through my hair, pushing it back from my face. The more it dries, the crazier my curls start to get. "I used some of your stuff."

"Use whatever you want."

"Are those my flowers?" I point to a long, thin table behind him against the wall. He doesn't look to where I motion to.

"They are." I can't help but smile.

"I always kind of hoped you took some of them that I brought in and put in vases."

"I always bring them to my office." I love these little glimpses he's allowing me of himself. I truly believe I may be the only one that he allows to see them.

"I really don't know what to do with you, Warren." I lean back, using my hands to support me.

"You can do anything you like."

### Chapter Eighteen

#### WARREN

“W hatever I’d like.” Tova repeats the words I just said to her with a mischievous, sexy smirk on her face. How is she both innocent and a temptress at the same time? I hadn’t meant it to be dirty, but the second I said it, I realized it was.

“Or I could do anything you like.” I let my fingers trail up her silky smooth legs. Tova’s skin is so delicate. I worry I could bruise her. I need to remember to be careful with my touch.

“Hey now!” She places her hands over mine, halting their progress. “It was I who got to do what I liked.” I swallow.

My dick has been hard for hours. It was the reason I’d made myself get out of bed. Tova was sleeping on top of me, rubbing her pussy against me. It was either fuck her or get the hell away from her.

The only time it had gone down was when I was helping her mother pack up her things, and that was because the woman hates me. She was trying to fake it, but if she could, she’d slit my throat. I don’t blame her. I’d slit someone’s throat too if they took Tova from me.

“What is it that you want to do?” My voice comes out gruffer than normal. Tova licks her bottom lip, her eyes dropping to the hard outline of my cock pressing against my slacks.



"This is new to me. Do you care if I explore?" Do I care? Fuck yes, I do. I have only been on the other end of torture once. I hadn't broken, but I know my little mouse could break me easily. She wouldn't even be trying.

I lean back in my chair, putting my hands on the armrests.

Tova licks her lips again, scooting to the end of the desk.

Her hand comes out to undo the buttons of my shirt.

When she gets it free, her fingers trace the tattoo I'd gotten when I was a teen on my left pec.

I never had a vice for women, drugs, or alcohol, but tattoos could curve an edge for me.

I reach out and pull Tova off the desk and onto my lap to straddle me.

She lets out a small laugh. I want to claim her mouth and sink my fingers into her hair, but I force myself to put my hands back on the armrests so she can explore as she desires.

I'm just fucking happy she wants to. That she's choosing to do this with a clear mind.

That she desires me in the way I do her.

Tova leans forward, placing a kiss on my neck. "I love when you kiss me here." She places another.

"It feels good." More than good.

"I liked it when you kissed me in other places."

"All you have to do is ask."

"Tempting." Another kiss. I close my eyes, wanting to soak this in. "But I want to explore my husband." A groan leaves me.

"Maybe you shouldn't talk." I grip the armrests tighter. Tova lifts her head, her brows furrowing together.

"You're not trying to be rude, are you?"

"No, never to you."

"You know, that sounds mean. Telling me not to talk."

"Tova, I'm seconds away from pinning you to my desk and fucking the shit out of you."

"The brightest smile breaks out across her face.

It warms a cold place deep inside of me.

So deep that I know only she could ever find it.

So I keep going. "You have no idea how badly I want you." I reach up to cup her cheek, my thumb drifting across her bottom lip. Tova kisses it.

"I want you too."

I drop my head back. "And when you say things like that, my mind tells me I can take

you, then.”

“You did take me.” Tova holds up her hand to show the gold band. My permanent mark on her for everyone to know she is taken. That she is bonded to me and only me for eternity.

“I suppose I did,” I admit.

“Even if you didn’t want to.” Her smile falters.

“Do you really believe I don’t want you?” This is not the time I want to think about my mother, but her words from last night about talking to Tova thrust to the front of my mind.

“I can feel you want me.” Tova shifts in my lap. “But that’s kind of normal for men.”

“I’m not normal,” I remind her.

“And I’m different.” She pauses. “To you.”

“You are.” I can no longer deny it or attempt to hide the feelings I have for Tova. It’s a part of me now. “You’ve been different from the start. I tried to hide it, but I failed at that.” Tova watches me curiously. “I should apologize, but I’m seeing now that it doesn’t matter.”

“Why?” Tova shifts in closer.

“I was always going to have you, or at least I never would have let anyone else have you. It’s why you’re here, after all.”

Tova shakes her head adamantly. “You didn’t want to marry me.

” Now she scoots back away from me. My hands move to her hips, making sure she doesn’t try to get farther away.

I’m paying attention to everything right now.

From the way she shifts her body to the expressions on her face, I want to understand her.

To be what she needs me to be as her husband.

To learn her likes and dislikes in every aspect of life.

“I didn’t want to marry you.” Marriage is a piece of paper.

I understand the legal aspects of marriage. That makes sense, but I don’t understand how people think it bonds them together. But I do understand the weight others put on it, and it’s clear as day how much my father loves my mother, and that puts a target right on her head.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” Tova glances down, not wanting to meet my eyes any longer, and I know she is fighting those fucking tears.

“Little mouse,” I say softly. Her head snaps back up, and she sits up straighter. I watch as she tries to shove all those emotions she has down. I can feel her putting that wall back up to protect herself.

“Let go of me. I want to go back to my room.”

“If you want to go back to our room, I’ll take you there.”

“I want to be alone.”

“You’ll never be alone again.” I lean in.

My little mouse doesn’t break eye contact; she keeps her eyes narrowed on me.

I love that she doesn’t back down from me.

As naïve as Tova is, I have always seen that passion in her.

When she puts her mind to something, it will be a fight to get her to back down.

“Why? So you can put me away somewhere and just go about your life? That was the plan, right? That you could clean me up, put a baby in me, and then stick me away so you didn’t have to deal with me. I would be docile and easy to control.”

“Since you’ve been told you had to marry me, you have not been easy to control.” Tova purses her lips, letting me know she’s not happy with my response.

I’m not sure my wife was ever easy to control. I merely influenced her parents' decisions to get her where I needed her. Now I’ve been ordered to be nice, and that’s what I’ve been, for now. I can’t promise that will always be the case. If they try to take my wife from me, then I’ll do what I must.

“Sorry to be such a handful.” Tova doesn’t look sorry at all.

I don't want her to stop either. Fighting us, yes, but I have to say, as much as I get pissed when she sneaks around or gets worked up, I rather enjoy the emotions she evokes in me. Even if I hate that I can't control them. She makes me feel alive.

I almost want to smile at her response, but I think better of it. I want to come to an understanding with her. For us to be on the same page.

“Did my little mouse overhear something?” I know where those words came from because they’d pissed me off when they were said.

My mind goes back to that day, tracing through my meeting with my father.

When I’d left my office, there had been a vase of flowers in the kitchen, letting me know Tova had been in the house.

She usually never ventured near my office, but I suppose that day she had.

There is no other way for her to know word for word what my father had said.

“You don’t deny it.” Neither does she.

“My father can be a very clever man, and he knew what he was doing when he ordered me to marry you.” Her tiny nose scrunches, and I have the strangest urge to kiss it.

“He knew I wanted you. I’m finding out that I haven’t done well in hiding my affection for you.

” I lay myself bare, knowing this is the only way to put her mind at ease.

To show her that I wasn’t forced to do anything.

That I’ve wanted her every second of every day since the moment I saw her.

Tova’s mouth opens and then closes, a range of emotions crossing her angelic face. “I don’t get it.” She shakes her head, sending her curls flying. “If you wanted me, then why wouldn’t you act on it?”

“You’re a weak spot for me.” As I say the words aloud, I hear how wrong they are. “Or so I thought. People will use you against me, so I tried to pretend I didn’t care about you, but when you’re close and I now have the right to touch you, my control slips away.”

"That's why you're so hot and cold." I watch as Tova settles back into me, her body relaxing.

"Don't think that I don't want you, Tova. You didn't come to live here because of your parents.

I brought you here. I wanted you here, so I made it happen.

" I might as well tell her it all. "I was always going to have you.

One way or another. My father may have ordered me to marry you, but it is all my doing.

It was my action that started this all."

"Warren." She whispers my name. I can see the unshed tears in her eyes. Not ones of sadness this time. Before I can utter another word, she leans down, taking my mouth in a kiss. “I’ve wanted you for years,” Tova says between kisses.

Her hands slide down between us, to my cock, feeling me through my slacks.

“Fantasized about you for just as long.”

“Careful.” I groan. Tova’s words are as intoxicating as her hand that starts to stroke me.

“I don’t want to be careful. We’ve lost enough time.” I grip the armrests again, my hands having a slight shake to them.

My wife is a goddess sent from the depths of hell. She’ll destroy me, or maybe, just maybe, she’ll save me. God knows there is no saving her from me.



### Chapter Nineteen

#### TOVA

My husband appears in pain as he grips the armrests of his chair so tightly I hear them groan. I could see the wariness in Warren's eyes when he admitted that it was by his design that my family ended up here. That I was always going to be his one way or another.

I think he believes that might scare me or make me mad. It has done the opposite. Call me crazy, but his confession made me feel powerful. Neither of us has been good with our communication. Then again, it's not as though we have gotten much of a chance to really speak on these things.

"Did you think I didn't want you?" I move my hand back and forth, stroking the hard outline of his cock through his slacks.

"They wanted you to marry my brother." Warren's eyes bore into me. "I would have killed them before I ever allowed that to happen." His expression might scare most, but if what Warren is telling me is true, I'll never fear him, at least not for myself.

"I have never wanted anyone but you, Warren. It used to break my heart when I thought you didn't see me."

"I've always seen you, little mouse. In fact, I think you're all I see.

" My fingers go for his belt, wanting to show him how badly I do want him.

Warren doesn't stop me as I undo it and then the button on his slacks.

He lifts slightly for me so I can reach in, my fingers wrapping around his cock to free him.

"Oh shit." I gasp when it springs free between us. "That's big."

"Tova." Warren grinds out my name through clenched teeth.

"What? It will split me in half!" I exclaim way too loudly. A bark of laughter comes from Warren. It sounds almost painful. His cock jerks in my hand.

"It will fit."

"Math wasn't my strong subject, Warren, but I'm not sure you're right," I tease.

"I won't hurt you." I'm pretty sure that's inevitable with me being a virgin, but I keep that thought to myself. I get the sense if I tell him that, he might never punch that card for me. That he will continue to try to protect me even from himself.

"It's soft." I didn't expect it to feel both soft and incredibly hard at the same time. I lick my bottom lip as I slowly stroke his cock; a bead of cum forms on the head of it that is angry and red, begging for attention. Last night he'd made me come twice, and then I'd passed out on him.

"It's never soft when you're around."

"Really?" I smirk. Warren is telling me facts, and he doesn't have a clue that it's stroking my ego and spurring me on. It makes more of the shyness I have around sex slip away.

“I didn’t masturbate before you came along.” I stare at my husband, wondering if I’d heard him wrong.

“You don’t masturbate?”

“I do now.”

“But what did you do when you got all turned on?” I wiggle closer to him as I keep stroking him so that his cock is nearly pressed against my panties. His shirt that I’m wearing has bunched up around my waist. A low pulse sparks to life between my thighs.

“I didn’t.” His words shock the crap out of me.

“You didn’t?” I stop stroking him. Warren audibly swallows. How do I have this powerful man who spent the eve of our wedding beating the crap out of someone in the palm of my hand?

“I dream of you. Vivid dreams of me eating your pussy, fucking you.” My stomach tightens.

“That was the first time I masturbated. What about you, little mouse? Do you touch yourself?” I nod.

“Tell me.” He wraps his hand around mine, squeezing tighter on his cock.

With his other hand, he pulls my panties to the side, his eyes going to my sex.

He moves his hand over mine to show me how to make him feel good.

“Tell me,” he orders with more force this time.

My nipples tighten. When he barks orders, it can piss me off; it can also really turn me on.

“I read dirty books.”

“Ones about sucking your boss off under the desk.” Do I hear a hint of jealousy?

“When I started to read them, the men would be faceless. I didn’t have anyone in mind, but then you came along, and suddenly they had a face. All of them are you.”

“You pictured sucking my cock under my desk?” I nod. I fantasized about him in all kinds of ways. “Then you touched yourself to those thoughts?” I nod again. “Don’t get shy on me now. I want to watch you touch yourself.”

“It’s supposed to be about me touching you right now.” I start to wiggle backward, but Warren stops me.

“You’re not going anywhere now, little mouse.”

“But I am.” I lick my lips again, wondering what he tastes like. “Under the desk.”

“Fucking hell.” Warren groans, closing his eyes.

When I start to move again, his eyes fly open.

“Shirt off first,” he orders but is already taking it off me.

I notice he does that often: issues an order he is already doing for me.

His impatience is adorable and freaking sexy. I’m not sure he feels the same.

The shirt slips off, losing a few buttons in the process, leaving me in nothing but my panties and socks. Warren's eyes roam over my body.

"May I get on my knees now, sir?" I can see the desire flare in his eyes. It only spurs me on to want to please him more.

"Tova," he warns. "Careful."

"Oh my God." He grips my hips to lift me, pushing his chair back in the process, and then gently places me on my knees in front of him. I laugh. "I could have done that myself. I'm not made of glass."

"You can be rather clumsy." He's so dang sweet, and now I'm thinking back about so many of our encounters. I'm seeing them in a totally new light now that I know how he truly feels. I also feel a bit vindicated that I wasn't imagining him having feelings for me.

I can't argue that. I have fallen out of two windows rather recently. Slowly I scoot backwards until I'm farther under his desk. "Come here." I wiggle my finger at him. Warren moves his chair forward, his thighs spreading farther apart. I can see the outline of his thick muscles through his pants.

"I want to see both of those hands," he orders when I wrap one around his cock again. "No touching yourself." My other hand was resting on my thigh. I likely would have touched myself.

"But I ache." Warren reaches for me. "No! I won't touch myself." I swat away his hands. "I want to suck you. To make you feel good."

"Then you won't touch your pussy, not until I can watch."

"Fine," I huff, peering up at him through my lashes, pretending to be annoyed when what I really am is turned on even more. "I won't touch myself."

"Sir." Oh my. Is he playing in to one of my fantasies, or might it be his too?

"I won't touch myself, sir..."

"Good girl." I suck in a breath. The throb between my thighs is growing. I'm soaked for him. "Now"—he tucks a few of my curls behind my ear—"I'll have that pretty mouth of yours on me. I've been thinking about it since I found out about the naughty things you've been reading."

"Is it naughty?"

"If you don't tell me, it is."

"You want me to tell you everything I read?"

"If it turns you on." I lean forward. Warren turns me on more than anything else.

I swipe my tongue across the head of his cock, getting my first taste of him. His cock jerks in my hand, a low groan coming from Warren that spurs me on to take the head of his cock into my mouth.

I go slowly at first, taking my time to get used to him. To explore. Warren's hand sinks into my hair. He doesn't push me down or try to make me go faster. He simply holds it, his fingers stroking it.

I take more of him into my mouth, moving my hand up and down the base of his cock. More grunts and groans come from Warren, his thighs flexing as I move faster. I swear I could come just from hearing how he's reacting to what I'm doing to him.

"Tova." My name leaves his lips like a prayer.

His hold on my hair tightens as I taste more of the pre-cum leaking from his cock.

I greedily suck it down. It's mine. I got it from him, and I want more.

"I'm close," I hear him say. I relax my throat and go down as far as I can, until the head of his cock hits the back of my throat.

"No." He jerks back, his cock slipping free from my mouth.

"Warren," I whimper. He lifts me, laying me out on his desk.

"The first time I come for you won't be in your mouth. It will be inside you, little mouse. Do you want that? For me to come inside your tight little cunt?"

I squeeze my thighs together to try to ease the ache that has grown exponentially.  
"Yes."

Warren steps between my thighs, guiding the head of his cock to my pussy. It slides through the folds of my sex, hitting my clit. I moan, my body primed for it. He thrusts back and forth, the head of his cock hitting my clit over and over.

I grip his shoulder, my other hand searching for the side of the desk, needing to hold on. I don't find it. Instead, Warren's hand finds mine. His eyes capture mine like he's staring straight into my soul.

My body seizes, and my hips try to lift as I start to come. Warren's cock slips lower as stars dance behind my eyes. I feel the head of his cock press into me.

He lets out a groan, and I feel hot cum spurt into me. Warren's deep blue eyes bore

into mine as a guttural growl rumbles from him before he collapses on top of me, burying his face in my neck. I wrap my arms around him, breathing in his earthy sweet scent.

Warren told me he didn't know if he was capable of love. I don't think that's true. The way he stares at me and touches me says it all.

He might not call this love, but whatever it is, I want it all.



### Chapter Twenty

WARREN

Tova's hand strokes up and down my back. I'm still standing on the side of the desk, but I'm draped over her. My face is buried in her wild curls. She always smells of sunshine.

My cock is still hard and pressed against her pussy.

I was so close to sliding fully inside of her.

Thank fuck I was so on edge I'd come, which let some of the blood go back to my head so I didn't take my wife for the first time on my desk.

I have fucked up a lot of this, but I won't fuck that up.

Besides, Tova isn't wrong. I'm a big guy compared to her.

I could feel how tight she was when I'd only put the head of my cock inside of her.

When I lift my head, Tova has a bright smile on her face.

My mother was right. I needed to talk with my wife.

Tova's wild curls sprawl across my desk.

How many times have I thought of this very scenario when it came to her?

It had gotten so bad she started to come into my dreams, ones I never recalled having before.

When they were of Tova, I remembered every second of them. I woke up affected.

“I was thinking—” Tova’s words cut off when I press down on her body, making sure it’s covered with mine as I reach under my desk. In quick succession I flick the safety off, aiming it at my office doors as they swing open.

“Shut the fucking door!” I bellow when I see my father standing there. His eyes widen, but he quickly shuts the door.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter.

“What just happened?” Tova’s eyes glance from me to the gun.

“I missed the alert that someone arrived.” I lean down, pressing a kiss to her lips. “You’re rather distracting.”

“Where did you pull a gun out of?”

“I have guns all over the house.” I stand, grabbing the shirt off the floor for Tova before fixing my own pants.

“They’re like stashed in random places?”

“Yes.”

Tova’s lips purse. She knows the life we live. Her own father has been a part of it for

decades.

“I need to show you where they are and teach you how to use them.”

“My father has shown me.” Tova touches the handle of the gun as I pull her panties back and put them in place before buttoning up her shirt.

“You need more than to be shown.” Tova should be able to handle a gun without thinking. It should be natural to her. Being my wife obviously makes her a target, and I need her to be able to protect herself. “I’ll show you,” I push, trying to gauge her reaction.

“Okay,” she agrees.

“What’s bothering you?”

A small V forms in the middle of her brow when she either doesn’t like something or she’s contemplating. I’m getting better at reading her, but after all of our miscommunications, I’m going to be blunt. Tiptoeing around shit has been hurting her.

“The idea of guns being so easy to access when we could have little ones running around here.” Her words have my cock aching again with the thought of her carrying my child. I love that her mind went there. I did come inside her minutes ago. This possibility is now really on the table.

“I will make sure that the issue is handled before any little ones are running around.”

“Thank you.” She tugs on my shirt to pull me down.

I claim her mouth in a kiss, the same mouth that had been wrapped around my cock

only minutes ago.

I groan at the reminder, my hard cock jerking in my pants.

“Hey.” Tova pushes at my chest. “Isn’t someone here?”

” She points her thumb over her shoulder toward the door.

“My father.” I sigh, hating that we’ve been interrupted.

“Oh my God.” Tova covers her face with her hands, her cheeks flushing.

“What’s wrong? He didn’t see you.” I’d made sure of that. I’d hate to have to shoot my own father for seeing my wife naked. She’s for my eyes only.

“He knows what we were doing,” she whispers.

“So?” We’re married. I should be on a honeymoon with my wife. Alone on some island or in the middle of nowhere in a cabin where I could have her all to myself. Why hadn’t I thought of that before?

“Because!” she hisses. Tova’s cheeks start to turn pinker, lighting up her freckles.

“I don’t understand. Are you embarrassed by this?” Of me? I don’t say the last part out loud, but that thought is there. That would sting. It hits me that this is what it feels like to give a shit about what someone thinks of you.

“What? Like, of us?” I give a curt nod. “No, it’s just weird. People knowing. I don’t know.” She throws her hands up. “I guess it doesn’t matter, but sex and parents is just weird.” Tova huffs a breath. “I bet I look a mess too.” She starts running her fingers through her hair, flustered.

“You’re never a mess. Unless you count your pussy.” Yes, I left that rather messy.

“Warren.” Tova gasps, her mouth dropping open. “You have a filthy mouth.” She hops down from my desk. I quickly brace her hips to make sure she doesn’t hurt herself. “I love it.” Tova lifts up on her tiptoes, her head dropping back. “This means I want a kiss.”

I comply, claiming her mouth in a deep, hard kiss. My hands slip under the shirt to her ass. It takes all I have not to lift her, carry her to our bed, and claim her fully as mine.

“All right now.” She wiggles her ass, only making me tighten my hold. “Your father.” Tova nods to the door. He will never open that door again without knocking.

“He can fuck off.”

Tova rolls her eyes. “I need to go find my contacts and change them out.”

“I put your glasses and contacts in the bathroom.” I thought she’d see them. When I went to her home to pack, I spotted them in her bathroom. I brought them back up to the house for her, making sure she had everything necessary to be comfortable in our home.

“Oh, I must have missed them. That was sweet of you.” I didn’t really think of it as being sweet. I only wanted to take care of her. I’m her husband. “Now deal with your father.” I release my hold on her.

“I should walk you back.”

“Seriously?” She laughs. “Wait, you are serious.” Tova shakes her head. Why would I not be? “I’m not leaving the house.”

“You don’t have pants on.”

“It’s a dress.” I shake my head no. It’s not a dress. Wearing what looks like only my shirt and her curls all wild, she is the definition of sex. “I’ll go straight to our room.”

“Fine,” I agree, not wanting to be controlling or appear that way. I can give her this. I know I have to pick my battles. There are other things that involve her that will come to a head. Especially when it has to do with her coming and going so freely.

“Thank you.” She wiggles her finger at me to lean down, and I do. Tova presses a kiss to my cheek. “Can you have dinner tonight?”

“What about lunch?”

Tova gives me a lopsided smile. “If you can.”

I will. I watch her leave my office; my father appears in the doorway shortly after.

“You beat the shit out of a cop?” I’m glad he doesn’t make mention of what he saw earlier between me and my wife when he opened the door.

“If you’re talking about the guy that physically hurt one of the girls at the club, then yes, I guess I beat the shit out of a cop.” I couldn’t care less who the fuck the individual was. He needed to be taught a lesson. A lesson that others would hear about and respond accordingly.

“Could bring some unwanted attention our way, though. Need to be careful for a while. You know how fragile these local cops’ egos can be.” Tova flashes through my mind at my father’s words.

I’ll kill that motherfucker without hesitation if he tries any sort of retaliation.

Especially if it's aimed at my wife. My fists clench.

"Isn't that why we have most of the cops in these towns on our payroll?"

"I'll make a few calls." My father nods in agreement.

I hadn't thought much of the asshole since Ronan and I rolled him out of the back of the SUV into an alley.

I need to go back to the information Violet sent over.

My wife has kept me rather occupied. She can even do it when she's nowhere near me.

"So you and Tova seem to be getting along just fine." He gives me a genuine smile. One that he usually reserves for my mother. I knew he wouldn't be able to keep his thoughts about what he saw to himself.

He's almost gloating, thinking he's a matchmaker. I'll silently give him the credit for giving me the push I needed when it came to Tova.

Never will I give him the satisfaction of admitting it out loud, though.

He already thinks he always knows best. Besides, I think it's bigger than him wanting me to find a wife because of some flowers and roses bullshit.

My father and I can be a lot alike but very different too. We both enjoy control, and I'm sure as much as he wants me to fully take over, letting go of that control is eating at him.

"My wife is none of your concern unless it involves her safety."

“I’m sure you will keep your wife safe.” He sits down in the chair in front of my desk. “Do what needs to be done.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I warn him.

My father believes thrusting Tova into this world and by my side will keep me solidly planted where I am. That I won’t let things get too cleaned up around here because I will do what I need to protect her... no matter the cost.



## Page 21

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### Chapter Twenty-One

#### TOVA

I get one box unpacked, and I swear when I go back out to the hallway to grab another, more have appeared.

I push my glasses up my nose, going to the box at the very end to bring it back into the bedroom.

When I open it, I know I haven't been going insane; there are indeed additional ones because I don't recognize the items inside of them.

The first is filled with all kinds of sewing supplies that put mine to shame.

Then there are the ones with more fabric than I know what to do with.

When I finally get almost everything unpacked, I have easily filled the spare room.

If this room is to possibly be a nursery one day, I'm going to need to move all this stuff to another location in the house, which is more than fine. This will work for now.

The thought gives me pause. I find myself thinking about having a baby with such ease, as if it's not a significant life-changing event. It should be freaking me out, but it doesn't.

I might be living off the excitement of my new husband.

I have hope for the future now that we've cleared up all the misunderstandings between the two of us.

When I get the rest of my clothes unpacked, I fall back onto the bed. I should send Marks a few pictures and?—

“Oh my God!” I jump up from the bed. Marks is going to murder me.

It's been days since I've contacted her.

Where the hell is my phone? The last time I remember having it was at the dock.

It's then I remember that my husband has my phone.

Did Warren do as he said he was going to and dig into Marks' life?

“Shit.” I hurry down the stairs towards my husband's office but pause when I see the doors closed.

“Tova.” Cosima calls my name.

“You're still here.”

“For now. I'm sure they'll ship me off again soon enough.” Cosima rolls her eyes.

“I thought you loved Paris?” Cosima had done her last few years of prep school in Switzerland and then moved to Paris to go to college.

“I did, or do.” Cosima shakes her head. “I don't know. It's complicated. It's different

when your family makes you stay somewhere rather than you picking it.”

“They’re making you?”

“I don’t know what they are doing, but I get the sense they don’t want me here.”

“I want you here.” I have always enjoyed Cosima’s company. We never got a chance to really be close, but when she was in town, we’d hang out and talk books. It was one of her vices, along with reality TV and shopping.

“Really?”

“Of course, not that I have a say.”

“You’re home now.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

Cosima lifts a brow. “It’s your house now. My parents never stay here anymore.” She’s right; they aren’t around much, except when you’re fooling around with your husband and they burst in. Out of all the times for them to show up. “Does Z stay here often?”

“I’m not sure.” I don’t spend a lot of time in the main house. That’s obviously going to change. “When he is, he sticks to his room.”

“Does he date?”

“Z?”

“Yes, Z.” Her voice drops, and she steps closer.

“I’ve never seen him with a date.” Cosima nods. What am I missing here?

“He’s all in my business about my dating life.”

“Are you dating someone?”

“No,” Cosima huffs. “But I could be.”

“So if you can’t date, then he can’t either?” I laugh. Cosima presses her lips together, not finding it funny at all.

"We should go shopping." Cosima pastes a smile on her face, changing the subject and her mood. "It will be a sisterly bonding experience."

"I'll speak to Warren about it."

"Warren, you say." Cosima smirks. "You're the only one who calls him that, you know." I have to admit that I kind of love that.

"He asked me to." Does that bother them?

"Of course he did. He's always been smitten with you."

"Smitten?" I burst into laughter. Smitten is not a word I would have thought anyone would call Warren.

"He is. It's sweet and good for him. I was worried." There has to be at least ten years between Warren and Cosima. "I'm sure you know he's, well, he's War. Not sure how to put it."

"I get it." That's all I'm going to say on it. How Warren is with me is special and ours.

It feels as intimate as sex. If Warren doesn't want to show anyone that side of himself, I'm not going to be telling everyone about it.

Okay, I might tell Marks some if she doesn't murder me.

"Is everything okay?" Warren asks, standing in the doorway to his office.

"We want to go shopping." Cosima answers before I can. Warren's brows pull together; he's not a fan of this idea. "You can't lock her away forever."

"I'm not locked away." My protectiveness for Warren is instant.

"When was the last time you left the farm?" Cosima challenges.

Well, shit. I try to search my memory. There hasn't been a reason for me to. Everything is delivered here, and my best friend is online, so I'm not skipping down to the coffee shop to meet up with her.

"How about you let me worry about my wife?" I make my way over to Warren, lifting on my tiptoes and dropping my head back. "This means you want a kiss," he says right before pressing his mouth to mine. I love that Warren is being affectionate even though his sister is in the room.

"This is bullshit and adorable." Cosima huffs, annoyed.

"Is there a problem?" Warren tucks me into his side.

"Besides other people getting to have a love life and me being shipped off all the time?" Cosima puts her hands on her hips. "If not, then I guess there isn't one."

"I'll see about you and my wife going shopping. If she wishes."

"I do." I'm not a big shopper like Cosima, but it is enjoyable to see what other designers are doing, and I should spend time with Cosima. I have only scratched the surface of whatever is going on with her, and I find I want to figure it out.

"Give me time, and I'll get it worked out."

"I heard about the wedding dress situation. Don't be doing that with this." Cosima pokes at Warren. I snort a laugh, really putting it together now that he isn't a fan of me leaving the farm. He'd made sure that all the wedding prep was done right here under his roof.

"Time, Cosima," Warren tells her again.

"Whatever." Cosima rolls her eyes. "At your speed it will never happen." She turns, heading back down the hallway toward the kitchen. "It took years for you to seal the deal with Tova," I hear her mutter.

"Do you truly wish to go shopping?" Warren asks when we're alone.

"I could use a friend."

"I'll be your friend," Warren offers. Even though his suggestion makes me melt, he knows that's not what I mean.

"Girlfriend. I need girl friends." I dip under his arm, pretty sure he only lets me because when I do, I'm heading into his office. The door clicks closed a second later.

"You want friends that are girls?"

"Yeah. I have one, and I'd like my phone back so that I can call her. I bet she's worried."

“Marks.”

I brace my arms behind me on Warren’s desk and lift myself onto it. “I don’t think I care for the way you said her name.”

“How did I say her name?” Warren flicks the lock on the office door, making his way toward me.

“Very War business mode.”

“Do you know who Marks is?” he asks.

“Sit.” I point to the chair in front of his desk.

“Are you ordering me around?”

“I am.” I give him a bright smile. It works because he sits down in the chair. The second his butt hits the seat, I drop my smile. “Do you know who Marks is?”

“Not as much as I would like.”

“I thought you weren’t going to look into her! Isn’t that what you said on the dock?”

“I never fully agreed to that.”

Crap, he hadn’t.

“Wait, do you do that on purpose? Moving the subject along so I forget you never fully agreed to that?”

“Yes.” I open and close my mouth because how do I respond to that? He didn’t lie or

dance around his answer.

“So you tricked me.” I wring my hands together in my lap. Warren’s hand covers both of mine.

“I did. I hadn’t thought of it as tricking you, but I did purposely move you away from it.

I don’t enjoy telling you no and seeing you upset, but I will do what I need to so that you are always protected.

” Only Warren can annoy me and somehow make it sweet.

I suppose it’s all about intent. I know in my heart that he’s only looking out for me.

That he wants to keep me safe at all costs.

It doesn’t mean I’m not going to continue giving him a hard time about it.

“Like never letting me leave.”

“Do you want to leave?” Warren’s eyes search my face.

“I don’t want to feel trapped, but I get that I’m not living a normal life.”

“Do you want a normal life?”

“I thought I was the one here to ask questions and demand things, like my phone.” I lift my chin.

“I am only trying to understand what you need so I can try to make it possible. If it



can be possible.”

“You make it really difficult to argue with you.”

“Would you like for us to argue?” Is Warren teasing me?

“Shut up.” I laugh. He really does make it impossible. “But in all seriousness, Marks is my friend.”

“Your friend that makes you use an app so that no one can track your texts or calls.”

“They don’t need to be tracked. I’m not doing anything, so what does it matter?”

“I don’t need an app to track you. I can do that on my own.” This is true. I can’t sneak out of one window without him popping up.

“How do you run an empire and stalk me at the same time?”

“It’s a skill set.” He smirks! Freaking smirks, and it's sexy as hell.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“Because we’re trying to argue?” I press my lips together to try not to laugh.

“Is this you dodging my questions?”

“This is me enjoying my wife’s company.” Warren leans back in his chair, stretching his legs out.

"Please tell me what's going on with Marks. She really is my friend." Warren lets out a loud breath.

"Why do you think she would have you use this app? You don't find this strange?"

"I don't know." I shrug. "I downloaded a few apps when she and I became friends. Discord and another. It's for video games."

"That app has nothing whatsoever to do with video games. You could speak to her on Discord or normal texting. The Signal app is meant to keep messages private and untraceable."

"You don't need to track Marks."

"When did this Marks become your friend? Was it before or after you moved to the farm?"

"After," I admit. "It can be isolating out here. I joined a few book clubs and met her in one."

"She's a hacker."

"I know she's talented with computers." I shrug.

Once she was able to fix my laptop without physically touching it.

It was kind of badass. I keep that to myself.

I'm already trying to dig Marks out of a hole right now.

"Doesn't mean she's going to hack me. There's nothing to hack. I don't even have a bank account."

"She wouldn't be trying to get information on you. Except maybe now."

“What? I’m not a desirable hack? Now my stock rises when I marry you,” I tease halfheartedly.

Warren leans forward, his elbows going to his knees. “Did you have stocks before?”

“No, I don’t know anything about stocks.” Now I feel dumb; maybe I should know these things. “But I can do a mean backstitch by hand.”

“I know, little mouse.” He reaches out, grabbing one of my ankles that I was swinging back and forth to rest in his lap. “You have many stocks now, so rest assured.”

Before this second, I didn't give stocks a second thought, so I'd been resting fine without them—or, I suppose, with them.

“Do I get them in the divorce?” I sass. His hold on my ankle tightens. “I’m joking.”

“A joke is funny.” I snort a laugh and quickly cover my mouth with my hand. He narrows his eyes at me. If that’s meant to be a warning of some kind, he’s going to have to come up with something new. “Tell me, you said you’ve desired me for a long time. Does she know that?”

“Desired? It’s called a crush.”

“I don’t think what I felt for you was a crush.”

“No, that's an obsession.” He nods as though I’m right when I was only teasing. I might have really hit the nail on the head. “I enjoy your obsession.”

“This is what comes with that, Tova. I am very obsessed and possessive of you, and I act accordingly.” Damn it. He has a point.

“So you’re worried she befriended me because I was here? I never said your name.”

“Maybe this is a discussion we should continue with Z.”

“Why?”

“Because Z knows of Marks.”

“What do you mean?” My stomach sinks. “She’s my friend.” Tears burn in my eyes. Warren stands, cupping my face between his hands.

“For her sake, she better be.”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

#### WARREN

“Y ou know, if you want to murder people because they make me cry, you should already be six feet under.”

“I didn’t mean to make you cry.” I pause in the hallway. “Do I make you cry often?”

“No.” She waves her hand. “I was trying to lighten the mood.” Tova’s bottom lip puffs out. “You think she used me?” Fuck, I want to tell her no so badly, but I’m not sure. She’s joking because she’s worried about being hurt. Marks is the one that should be worried. I’ll dismantle her whole world.

“There is a possibility she didn’t. I can understand wanting to be close to you. It’s why I brought you here. So no one else would take you.”

“Wait, what?” Tova tilts her head to the side, her nose scrunching. “I know you mentioned you wanted me here, but you did that because you didn’t want to share me?”

I could share her with her family and, I suppose, girlfriends. “If I wanted you so badly, I was positive so would others. If I had you here, then no one could try and take you.”

“Except you.” She lifts a brow, and I know she’s teasing me again.

“I’ll do whatever I need to.”

“I know.” Tova goes up on her tiptoes. I lean down to press my mouth to hers. When her lips part, I greedily slip my tongue inside to get a taste of her sweetness. My fix, really. Each one of her kisses soothes something inside of me.

“Do you guys have to do this outside my bedroom?” Z asks, leaning up against the doorframe.

“My wife wants to know about Marks.”

“Right.” Z shakes his head, turning to go back into his bedroom. He leaves the door open for us to follow him in. “You’re not the only one who wants to know who she is.”

“How do you know her?” Tova’s eyes go to the wall of computer screens while Z’s go to me.

I give him a nod. “She’s my wife now.”

“Marks and I play in the same world. We have even worked on a few projects together.”

“But you don’t know who she is?” I ask.

“Don’t know who a lot of people are in my world. People don’t know who the fuck I am. I don’t actually exist. I’m Zero to them.”

Z isn’t wrong. Technically he doesn’t even exist. What feels like another lifetime ago, our father brought him home.

Z was presumed to have died when his parents were murdered.

My father said it was best if people thought that he had met his death so they wouldn't come looking for him.

We never asked my father questions. What he said was law, and we all accepted Z into our family.

Who Z's parents were, I'm not sure we'll ever know.

If my parents know, they have kept that secret close.

The rest of the world believes Zenzo is my parents' son. My mother said it was for the best. That we must pretend. It was to protect him. I don't see him any differently than I do Ronan. I actually might be closer with Z.

"But if she befriended me because of you guys, then maybe Marks does know who you are."

Z's eyes lock with mine, and I hear his unspoken words that nobody knows who he truly is.

"She doesn't know who I am in her world, but she does know who the Marino family is. That much is clear from the messages she's been sending you."

"What's she been saying?" Tova asks.

"I have the phone." I turned it off and put it in the safe.

"I know. It took me all night, but I locked in on the messages, chasing them down. I spent fucking hours, and I got them, but I couldn't get a trace on her." Z shakes his

head. "She's fucking good, I'll give her that. It wasn't something she did for me to get them. That was on the Signal app."

"So now what? I just can't be her friend?" Tova stares up at me with watery eyes. "Can we call her?"

"Z?"

"I don't see why not. The only thing that was an issue is Tova's phone." Z walks over to his computer. "Which is why I got her a new one." He holds it out to me, but Tova grabs it quickly. Z's eyes bounce between the two of us, and I'm sure he's waiting to see what my reaction is going to be.

"Why was my phone an issue?"

"She could hack it. Listen in on anything. There is a lot she could do if she wanted."

"Really?" Tova's face turns to one of panic.

"What?" I ask.

"I let her fix my laptop once," she admits to Z. "It was being weird, and she remoted in and fixed it."

"Bring it to me and I can check it over," Z tells her.

"Wait, like you can check to see if she's done something? That could clue us in?"

"Possibly."

"I'll be right back!" Tova takes off.



“Don’t run,” I shout after her. She can be pretty clumsy, especially when she’s in a rush.

“No running in the house.” Z chuckles. “That a new house rule?” If it were, it would be the purest rule to ever exist around here.

“She trips walking.”

“You really are protective of her.” Z drops down in his chair.

“You think this girl is using her?” I ignore his comment because it doesn’t matter. My wife and how I handle her is my business.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “If she was trying to get to us, it wouldn’t be for herself. Someone would have had to hire her, but that would be a long con, and for what? No one knew Dad was going to force your hand to marry Tova,” I begin to protest, but Z puts his hand up to stop me.

“Plus, wives are never involved in our bigger dealings.”

“What if it was to take her? To use her against me.” That would be my worst fucking fear coming to reality.

“Like Mom?” I nod. “Again, that’s a long con, and I don’t think Marks does that shit.

The few projects that I know we were both on were government jobs.

I poked around about her, and she’s a ball-busting jokester.

Young too. Obviously not fully on the up and up, but from what I could dig up, she runs pretty clean. ”

I don't get into all the details of the things Z does, but I know he's worked with the government more than once.

He's also done jobs for other big families on the West Coast. He's never given me a reason not to trust him, and he's saved our asses before we even knew things were happening.

We each have our part in the family. That's why it runs as smoothly as it does.

"I got it." Tova comes rushing back in, pink laptop in hand. She starts to hand it to Z but pulls back. "Don't access my Kindle library. Pinky promise." I can't help the smile that breaks out on my face at the look on Z's face.

"She's not going to back down," I warn him.

"I promise I won't." Z lifts his right arm, holding up three fingers.

"You were a Boy Scout?" Tova says dryly. A bark of laughter leaves me.

"A Boy Scout." I shake my head. Z might be better with people than Ronan is, but that doesn't mean he wants to hang out in a club with others. He's not big on the outdoors either unless it's on his motorcycle.

"Give me the laptop."

Tova hands it over to him, and he takes it back over to his mountain of computers.

"Think Z bugged my phone?" Tova whispers to me.

"I didn't."

"He's got really good fucking hearing," I inform her. Creepy good. There's no getting shit past him around here.

"Maybe Z is a robot." Tova snickers.

"Oh, I'm the robot." He levels a stare at me, making Tova laugh harder.

"Fair point."

"Don't be a brat, little mouse." I grab her sides.

"Ah! That tickles." Tova wiggles all around.

"Maybe this is how I'll get you to obey."

"I give, I give." Tova falls into me. I tug her close. When I glance back up, Z is watching us with an expression of longing. When he notices I'm watching him back, he turns his attention to Tova's laptop.

"I'll get you a new one."

Tova shrugs. "I don't use it much."

Z opens the laptop, and a half second later, a voice comes from it. "Tova!" My wife jumps.

"Marks." Tova tries to rush over to the laptop, but I keep my hold on her.

"Marks isn't coming through the laptop." Z smirks. "Plus, I've got it locked down."

"Tova, are you okay?" The Marks girl ignores us, continuing to try to get to Tova.

“I’m fine,” Tova responds, her fingers digging into the front of my shirt.

“How can I know for sure? What’s your favorite paranormal read?”

“Bear shifter!” Tova fires back. Aren’t we supposed to be questioning Marks?

"Tova! I'm going to freaking murder you." My wife’s eyes go round like saucers, realizing I’m not going to like that Marks has threatened her.

"She didn't mean it!" Tova shifts her whole body in front of me, thinking I'm going to destroy the laptop. She thought right.

"I have been so freaking worried!" The girl keeps shouting through the computer.

"I'm sorry." Tova's shoulders drop.

"We are not fucking sorry," I bark right back. Maybe I should have growled instead. Now I have to be jealous of imaginary things. A fucking bear shifter.

"Oh, you shut up. You're the one who went to the strip club and made her cry, asshole!" Marks doesn’t hesitate to try to put me in my place.

“He was working.” My wife is quick to defend me. Tova brushes one of her curls out of her face, reminding me of her hair tie that I’m still wearing around my wrist. I reach down and snap it hard to try and keep my anger in check. Tova doesn’t care for when I’m mean to people she likes.

“Tova.” Marks sighs loudly.

“I know it sounds lame, but it’s true.” Tova glances around. “We’ll ah, talk about that later.”

“How are we going to talk when the warden took your phone?”

“I got a new one.” Tova pulls it out like she is going to show it to her.

“Little mouse,” I say gently to her.

“Oh right, how did you know Warren was at the strip club?” I snap the band again.

“I told you I went poking around after I found out you were marrying Warren Marino.”

“But how long have you known about the Marino family? I never said that name to you before.” Good girl, she was protecting us before she was one of us. Marks is quiet for a long moment, knowing my little mouse has caught her.

“I’ve known from almost the start,” she finally admits.

“Almost the start?” Tova repeats.

“I’m nosy, you know that.” Tova nods her head. “So once we started talking all the time, I looked into you to make sure you weren’t a weirdo. Once I saw your location, the rest came together.” The line goes quiet again. “Tova?”

“I’m here.” Tova shifts on her feet. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What was I going to say? Hey, I know you live on the Marino compound when you never say that name?”

“It’s a farm.”

“Fine, a farm.” I didn’t know you could hear an eye roll till now. “I didn’t snoop until

you told me you were marrying Warren. There isn't a ton online about him, and..." She pauses.

"You're welcome." Z smirks at a job well done by him.

"I was worried. Everything seemed to be happening so fast."

"You tried to talk her out of marrying me," I cut in.

"Yeah, I did, dickhead. Chilling at the strip club while Tova over here has been crushing on you for years!"

"Marks!" Tova hisses.

"Sorry, I'm mad. He's a douche canoe, and then he took your phone. Oh, and let's not forget how he is now trying to find me. Good luck, dipshit."

"Told you. Ball buster."

"Who is that?" Marks asks. "One of the brothers?" Tova looks at me, and I nod.

"Yes," Tova answers her. "See, we were friends first, and Marks only peeked into you out of concern for me. That's why she was going to help me run if I needed to."

Peeked?

"But she wouldn't run because you're holding her parents over her head." I can't deny that.

"Warren isn't great with talking things out. He wouldn't hurt my parents." Tova gives me a hard stare while nodding, indicating that I should verbally agree. I cannot.

“He'll kill your parents if they try to take you from him. Might as well get that straight.”

“Warren?” Tova's expression changes, becoming harder to read, so I tread lightly.

“I told you never to put anyone between us.” Tova's brows lift. I gave her that warning very clearly. “But I would not have killed your parents if you refused to marry me.”

“Nah, War doesn't need a marriage license. He'll just keep you.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I bark at my brother.

"Is that true?" Tova's lips pull up on one side.

"You're mine, and you're not going anywhere." That's as much as I'm going to say. My wife and I are in a good place. I don't need anyone fucking that up.

"As long as she wants to be there, I can't make her leave. That said, if I were you, I'd mind my p's and q's because if she does want to run, I will help her. So it would behoove you to be a very good boy."

"Good boy!" Z bursts into laughter. Tova covers her mouth with her hand, trying to hide her giggles as well.

I'm not sure what to make of this. Her friend is loyal, which is a good thing, but could she help my wife leave me? I'm not so sure about that.

"I'm not going anywhere." Tova rubs circles with her hand on my chest, trying to soothe me. It might be working.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### TOVA

I can't keep the smile off my face knowing Marks proved to them that she wasn't some plant and is really my friend.

Warren might not be super happy about all of this, but I am, knowing I get to keep Marks.

He, Z, and she went around and around about the logistics and computer stuff and other things I don't fully understand.

All I know is the end result is that my phone is now deemed safe to speak with Marks.

"It's female intuition," I tell my husband. "I knew Marks was really my friend, just like I knew you were always stealing glances at me." I thought I made that up in my mind, but nope. "You were more than stealing glances, you little stalker."

"Little stalker?"

"Okay." I wave my hands around him. "Big stalker." Warren isn't fully convinced, but I think he gave in for me. I could also tell from Z's reactions to everything that he was shocked with what Warren was letting me get away with, or I suppose talking him into.



I lift up on my tiptoes. Warren shakes his head but smiles as he leans down to kiss me. "And you're not a douche canoe or dickhead."

"What about dipshit?"

I snort a laugh. "Are you making a joke again, Warren?"

"Not sure what I'm fucking doing anymore." He runs a hand down his face. I'm sure the last few days have been a lot for him. He's used to being in control, barking orders and having everyone follow them. And then there's me.

"What you're doing is making your wife very happy." I play with the buttons on his shirt.

"You're not crying."

"I am not crying," I agree.

"What am I going to do with you, little mouse?" I press myself against him.

"Lots of dirty things, I hope." I smirk. "You know, I hear if you don't consummate your marriage, you're not really married."

"Little mouse," Warren warns, wrapping an arm around me. He lifts me off my feet.

"Sir." Someone clears their throat. I peek over Warren's shoulder to see one of his men behind him. Warren puts me back on my feet before turning to face the man, completely blocking my view. "There is an issue and a call."

"Wait outside my office," he tells him. I hear the man's steps retreat before Warren turns back to face me.

“You could have introduced me.”

“Did you want me to?”

I shrug. “You don’t think I should know some of the people who are always coming and going from here?”

At least the ones I see on the regular?” Warren is quiet, and I know he’s contemplating this.

I bet he's going over all kinds of different things in that head of his. “So that I’m comfortable with them. Maybe even know their names in case I ever need something.”

“I see your point, little mouse.”

“Good, now go and do whatever it is you do. Murder and mayhem.”

“Murder and mayhem?” Warren gives me a half smile.

“You’re probably not big on mayhem, but do whatever it is you do. Maybe play with those stocks of ours.”

“And what will my wife be doing?”

“As much as I want to play with all the goodies you got me—thank you, by the way”—I strum my fingers on his chest, enjoying that touching him is so natural now—“I really want to call Marks, and I should go see my parents.”

“You haven’t had lunch.”

“Do you know everything I do? I could have snuck a snack.”

“You need more than a snack.”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes dramatically. “I’ll eat something and put on sunscreen.”

“Good girl,” he says, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “We’ll have dinner together.”

“I shall meet you in the dining room at seven, sir.”

“Six.”

“Fine,” I sigh. “You win this one. I can meet you at six.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going now.” I walk backwards away from him. “Don’t track blood into the house.”

“Be good, little mouse.”

“I make no promises.” I spin around, taking off. I’ll grab a quick peanut butter and jelly sandwich. When I enter the kitchen, I see food already laid out on the island. There are several small sandwiches, each accompanied by freshly cut fruit and vegetables.

“Mrs. Marino,” Chef Marcello greets me. “I set food out.”

“This isn’t only for me, right?” I would not put it past Warren to have ordered such a big spread, but it would be a waste.

“When a lot of the family is coming and going, I keep a variety of things out for everyone.”

“Thank you.” I grab a plate. “And can you call me Tova?” As much as I do love hearing my new last name, I don’t want things to be so formal. And if I’m fully honest, I want everyone to like me and not just tolerate me.

“I can.” He gives me a soft smile. “I do have a few things to go over with you.”

“Me?” I use my free hand to point a finger at myself while I continue to lift up the cute little finger sandwich to my mouth.

“Yes, you.” He grabs a binder off the counter before coming around the kitchen island to show it to me. “You need to set meals and such for the coming week.”

“I do?”

“You are the lady of the house now.”

“Am I?” I laugh. “I don’t think anyone has ever called me a lady before.”

Marcello flips open the binder to show me his recipes and ideas. It all appears wonderful to me. I’m not a chef, but based on his Pop-Tarts, I’m going to trust what he has laid out, and I tell him as much before I slip out the back to call Marks.

"Are you in trouble?" Marks says as a way of greeting when she picks up my call.

"Hello to you too," I say dryly.

"What? He could tie you to a chair and torture you."

"I really don't see that happening unless it's him tying me to the bed."

"Wow, we jumped from virgin to bondage rather quickly." I laugh.

"Sorry to inform you of this, but I still have that V-card."

"That's interesting. He can go to a brothel, but?—"

"Marks." I cut her off. "It's not like that."

"Then tell me what it's like."

"All right." I let out a giant breath. "I guess I'll start from the dock and him taking my phone."

Marks listens as I tell her everything that's happened. I leave some parts out, but I give her a lot. I don't want her to hate my husband. I know it shouldn't matter, but it does, and her opinions mean a lot to me. She means a lot to me.

"You told him you shaved your vagina for this." Marks laughs so hard that I have to pull the phone away from my ear. So much so that I'm starting to get a little mad that she won't stop. Every time I think she's finished, she cracks up all over again.

"Hey, it worked. He took a peek."

"That wasn't a peek."

"Marks!" I hiss, glancing behind me to make sure no one is there.

For all I know, Warren has someone following me around.

I wouldn't put it past him. I've already had the embarrassment of his dad walking in on us in his office.

I don't need someone else overhearing me tell Marks the naughty things Warren and I do to each other.

"This is so not what I was thinking. The man has a cold reputation, to put it nicely."

"He's not that way with me. He's the complete opposite. He says I'm different."

"Normally I'd call bullshit, but he does sound different with you."

"So everyone is okay with everyone," I confirm.

"Now, I didn't say that, but I'm going to resist digging into Z."

"What do you mean?"

"I might have been able to get into your phone and laptop, but that far as you call it is locked down so tight I can't get in anywhere, and I tried."

"Don't do that!" I snap at her. "You're going to get yourself in trouble."

"Like tied to a chair trouble?" she jokes, but I don't find it funny at all. Warren will play nice if it's just Marks snooping for me, but if she does anything that he perceives as a threat, I know without a doubt that he won't hesitate to protect his family.

"Marks," I groan.

"Okay, okay. I won't dig into Z, but what about Ronan?"

“What about him?”

“The man is fine.” I don’t think I have ever heard Marks comment on a man’s appearance unless it was to roast them.

“Really?”

“I know I’ve got issues, but the vagina likes what it likes.”

“I can’t with you.” I laugh. “You could come over and meet him.”

“And end up tied to a chair? Hard pass.”

“What if you end up tied to a bed?” I’m only teasing, but Marks sucks in a breath loud enough for me to hear.

“Yeah, not happening either. In fact, now that I know my vagina has a thing for him, I’m going to stay far away.” I let it go for now, but my curiosity is piqued.

We talk for a bit longer before I end the call to pop in to see my parents. It’s weird to think of it as their home and not mine.

It’s crazy how quickly your life can change, and I have a feeling this is only the beginning.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### WARREN

She makes the most adorable sounds when she eats. These little moans and sighs are endearing. They aren't as loud as when she climaxes, but nonetheless enjoyable. I watch my wife eat. Why is everything she does so fascinating to me? I suppose it doesn't matter.

I should simply enjoy it, and there isn't much that I do of that anymore.

Before, my life was about taking over and doing what I needed to keep my family on top.

I found fulfillment in that or the next deal I could close—or, better yet, the next politician I could get under my thumb.

Advancing my family's business had been my focus.

I was livid after speaking to Larson in my office this afternoon.

Him interrupting me and Tova hadn't put me in the best mood to begin with.

So hearing that one of our warehouses at the docks was broken into didn't exactly put me in a better mood.

The break-in wasn't to steal anything; that I could understand.



It could be anyone, but they'd broken in to do damage, and they'd done a great deal of it.

It's a cost I'm going to have to eat and replace.

Thankfully, the damage was done to one of our long-standing customers and not one of the new ones I recently acquired. The last thing I need is this bit of information getting out. It could be very detrimental to the direction I'm trying to steer the family business in.

The newer clients that I've obtained and am still acquiring are legit reputable companies. I've been letting go of others that could potentially be messy or cause problems. This is how I was supposed to clean things up, but now it's clear that someone out there isn't too happy about that.

The list isn't too long of who it could be.

I have tasked some of my men to look into the clients that we have stopped doing business with.

I'm sure I'm high on their shit list. It's not easy to haul in containers of stolen goods and other things without them getting busted by a government organization.

We've provided protection, but somewhere they crossed lines and tried to slip things in under our radar because I put restrictions on things.

We have never tolerated human trafficking, but I am slowly dwindling down on other items and products as well.

The drugs can be tricky because if I don't manage them, someone else will try to.

My mood had been shit when I went to go in search of my wife. I heard her laughter the second I stepped out of my office, following it down the hallway and into the kitchen where she and our chef were talking, along with one of my men.

It has made my shitty mood fade. Tova is back to her old self. There are no more tears, defiance, or anger toward me. Watching and listening to her had been one of my favorite pastimes before she was aware I was doing it. Before she knew she'd be my wife.

"Turner is really nice." Tova takes a bite of her grilled cheese. I'm not sure most would agree with her. Turner is good at getting information from people. That's why he is here in the first place. I'd gone over everything with him. Then when I was done, I asked him to say hello to my wife.

I trust Turner, and he's happily married.

Tova wanted my men to talk to her, so I arranged it.

I'll test a few more. Then I need to see about finding friends for her.

I'm still not a giant fan of Marks. I've come to the conclusion that I could replace her by finding Tova a better friend.

If it's girlfriends she wants, then that's what she'll get.

My wife will soon find out that I'll do anything to make her happy. Well, anything within reason.

"If you say so." I reach over, wiping the corner of her mouth with my thumb.

"Is he some super bad guy who tortures people to spill all of their secrets?" she says,

laughing but quickly recognizes the look on my face. “Well, he was nice to me. I’m sure he had his reasons to not be nice to those other people.” She takes another bite of her sandwich.

“What am I going to do with you, little mouse?” I shake my head at her.

“I’ve got plenty of suggestions.” Her tongue comes out to lick her lips. Fuck. “Why aren’t you eating?”

“I’m enjoying watching my wife.” That earns me a smile. “And I plan to eat you later.” Tova flushes a pretty pink.

“So we’re going to, you know—” Tova wiggles her eyebrows.

“We’re going to what?” I play coy, wanting to hear her say it.

“Warren—”

“Little mouse.” Tova giggles. Her sweet, soft disposition is disarming, but Tova has always been that way for me from the very start.

“Consummate our marriage.”

“I plan to have my way with my wife after dinner.” I nod down toward her plate for her to eat more.

"Can I tell you something?" Tova takes another bite of her food.

"I'd like it if you told me everything." I could listen to her speak as a calming sound alone.

"Be careful what you wish for." She wiggles a finger at me. "But, ah—" Tova tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. "I had a few drinks at our wedding because I was nervous about our wedding night. You know?"

"You were rather vocal about showing me your pussy."

"So crude," Tova says playfully.

"My apologies. Your pretty pussy." She snorts a laugh. "You have nothing to be nervous about. We can take things slow." It might kill me, but I'd rather do that than hurt her.

"I'm a virgin, so I can't help it." She picks up her glass to take a sip.

"I'm a virgin too, so—" Tova spits her water out, spraying it across the table.

"Are you okay?" I stand and go over to her.

"Don't joke like that when I'm taking a drink." She holds her hand to her chest. "When did you get all jokey?"

"I wasn't joking."

Tova stares up at me, blinking. "How?"

"I told you that you had nothing to worry about when it came to other women. That day in the garden I told you it was new territory to me when I kissed you," I remind her.

"I can't," she laughs. "Our communication is something else, I'll tell you."

“Like you not telling me you desire a bear shifter?” Tova bursts into laughter again, almost falling out of her chair, but I catch her.

Her soft body melts to mine, her laughter shaking through her into me.

I never knew someone else’s happiness could be infectious, but that’s exactly how it is with Tova.

Fuck it. I’ll bring food up later, after I bury myself between her thighs. I can’t wait another second to claim her as mine. I carry my wife through the house, bride-style, as she seems to prefer.

“Is it time?” Tova starts to undo the buttons on my shirt.

“For me to transform into a bear? You’re going to be sorely disappointed.”

“I don’t know. You have a really good growl.”

“That so?” I kick open the door to our bedroom, carrying her over to the bed. “Get naked,” I growl, gently tossing her onto the bed before I return to shut our bedroom door and lock it. No one is going to interrupt us this time.

I undo the rest of the buttons on my shirt as I make my way back to the bed, to my wife. Tova discards all of her clothes except for her panties and bra.

“All of it.” I pull my belt free, letting it drop to the floor before divesting myself of the rest of my clothes. Tova nibbles on her bottom lip, her eyes tracing me up and down.

“You’re a piece of art, you know that?” She runs her fingers up my chest and over to the scar on my shoulder, where I was stabbed years ago. The other guy hadn’t fared

so well.

“And you still have clothes on.” Her face is flushed; she glances down and away from me. “Little mouse?”

“It’s so bright in here, and you’re all—” She waves her hand up and down my body, almost hitting my cock that is sticking straight out at her, begging for attention, for her. “I’ve got no liquid courage, and I’m chubby.”

“Chubby?” I shake my head. “You’re perfect.” I suppose if this is chubby, then that is what I’m attracted to.

“I’m not. I’m?—”

“The only woman that I have ever wanted or desired. To me, you’re perfect in every way. You will always be that to me, Tova.”

Her lips turn up into a smile. “Okay, that was really sweet.”

“It’s the truth.” I want to be sweet to her if that is what makes her smile, but my words are true. Curvy, skinny, tall, or short doesn’t matter. I just want Tova, my wife.

She reaches behind her, unsnapping her bra and letting it fall away to reveal her pert breasts.

Her dusky pink nipples are hard and ready for my mouth to be on them.

Tova falls back onto the bed, her fingers dipping into her silky pink panties.

I watch as she wiggles them down her legs before letting them drop off the side of the bed.

I wrap my hand around my cock and squeeze. I'm about to lose control and pounce on her. She's laid out in my bed and mine for the taking. Tova's wild curls that are always so distracting are splayed out all around her.

Maybe my control is better than I thought. I've waited years to have this. That is a miracle in itself.

"Spread your thighs," I order. Tova's teeth sink into her bottom lip as she proceeds to spread them, giving me a view of her pussy. It is wet and glistening, her clit popping out between the folds, begging for my mouth.

"Warren—" Tova shifts, starting to close her legs. I grab her knees, stopping her.

"Are you trying to take your pussy away from me, little mouse?" She shakes her head no rapidly.

"It's achy. I need relief."

"Then allow your husband to soothe it." Tova opens her legs wider for me this time.

"Words, little mouse. You said our communication isn't the best." I know she's being shy; it's sweet and innocent, but I want her to be open with me.

To tell me what her needs are so that I can meet and exceed every one of them.

"Soothe it." Her bottom lip puffs out. "Please."

That will do for now. I'm barely hanging on myself.

My mouth is watering to taste her again, and I can't hold back any longer. I bury my face between her lush thighs, covering her clit with my mouth.

My tongue works the little nub until she is moaning and whimpering.

When I sense her body starting to tense up, I suck on her engorged clit.

Tova cries out my name as her sweet cream fills my mouth.

I greedily drink it up, even dipping my tongue lower to thrust inside of her to make sure I get every drop she has given me. I won't waste a bit of it.

When I lift my head, Tova's eyes are closed, her cheeks flushed, and her lips parted as her chest rises and falls, trying to catch her breath. I take a moment to admire my wife sprawled out on our bed, satisfied.

"Warren?" Her eyes flutter open. "Come here." She wiggles her finger at me. Who could resist such an offer? I'd follow her to the depths of hell if she wanted. Destroy the devil himself and give her his throne, as long as she lets me touch every inch of her.

I move up her body, my elbows coming to rest on either side of her head.

My cock slides through her wet folds and down to her opening.

I kiss her as I push forward, the head of my cock entering her, and I feel the barrier of her virginity.

She lets out a small gasp, and I deepen the kiss, my tongue stroking against hers. Tova wraps her arms around my neck.

"It's okay," she mutters against my mouth between kisses, sensing my hesitation. I know this is going to hurt her. "I want it. I want you."



Her words finally break my resolve. I can't wait another second.

I thrust forward a few inches, her tightness enveloping me.

Tova lets out a small whimper, her fingers gripping my shoulders tighter.

I still my body, allowing her time to adjust. Her pussy is locked around me like a vise.

If this was all she ever let me have, I'd die a happy man.

"Warren. Please," she moans. I can hear the need in her voice.

"Please what?" I know exactly what she wants, but I need her to tell me. "Need your words, little mouse."

"Make love to your wife." I grit my teeth and drive forward, sinking every inch into her. A loud gasp leaves her, and she closes her eyes tightly. My fingers dig into the sheets as I steel myself.

"Tova." I press a kiss to her mouth and then to her cheeks, anywhere that I can reach with my mouth.

"I don't like when you use my name," she whispers, her watery eyes meeting mine. No tears fall.

"I'll do better." Her lips tip up into a smile. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"I'm not." Tova shifts, wiggling her hips. "It doesn't hurt anymore." With a grimace, I pull out and thrust back in. When a soft moan leaves her, a rush of relief fills me. So does the reality that she is fully ready for me.

"That's my girl." I use slow strokes until she relaxes more. Her pussy begins to suck me in, taunting me to move faster, harder.

When Tova wraps her legs around me, I give. My thrusts become quicker. Tova is right there with me, her own movements becoming wilder, her hips meeting my thrusts. I look down between us to see my cock disappear in and out of her.

It's too much. I rip my gaze away, knowing I won't last if I keep watching, but then my eyes land on her face. She's lost in pleasure. Tova's pussy starts to flutter around my cock, her nails digging into me. She's so fucking beautiful. I watch her come, her hips bucking as she cries out my name.

I tip over the edge with her, my balls drawing up tight, electricity shooting through me as I start to come.

I push my knees into the mattress to drive into her as deep as I can get, holding myself there as I fill her with my release.

I groan, dropping my forehead to hers, allowing myself to feel all of it.

"Wow." Tova licks her lips. "You're not bad for a virgin." I bark a laugh. "Even growled a few times."

I kiss the tip of her nose, staring down at her. My chest grows tight, and I know, in this moment, I do finally know what love is, and it's my Tova, my little mouse, my wife.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### TOVA

“ I have a confession.” I glance down at my phone sitting on my sewing table, wondering what the hell Marks is about to confess.

I have her on speaker since I’m alone in Warren and my bedroom.

We often will leave our phones open and talk to each other while doing other things.

Today I’m sewing pockets onto a new summer dress Cosima had gotten.

It was beyond flattering when she asked me to do it.

Cosima loves fashion, but her stuff is super fancy.

I worried about altering a dress that likely cost two thousand dollars.

Especially adding pockets to it. My only comfort was knowing if I mess it up, Warren can use those stocks he told me about to fix it.

“Are you going to say it?” I ask when Marks remains silent. I swear she is so dramatic when she has news. She loves to dangle it for a bit before she divulges the goods.

“I’m obsessed with male thighs.” Marks lets out a dramatic sigh. “Why are they so

hot?" I can't argue with that. "I could hump a thigh." I burst into laughter. "It's not funny! I don't want to be into thighs." I can't help the images of Warren's thick, muscular thighs that flash through my head.

"It's human nature, I think I read that." I could be wrong. "It has to do with thrusting and sex. The power is in the thighs."

"Okay, that's great and all. I understand that, but I like them hairy! What about that gross part?"

"Is it gross if it turns you on?"

"Hmm. I don't know." I can hear her shifting around. "You know, people with some kinks like getting peed on, do they think it's gross?"

"How would I know?" How do we end up in these conversations?

"You're the one who is having all the sex." My cheeks warm at her comment. I have been having lots of sex. I wiggle in my seat, thinking about Warren waking me with his mouth and then his cock.

"It's vanilla sex." It's not that I'm complaining.

We're still getting the hang of it. It's been a week, and my mind is still trying to process that Warren was a virgin too.

I mean, it makes sense with how he can be and his personality, but he didn't fuck me like a virgin.

But then again, what the hell do I know?

"Still more than I'm having."

"Maybe that's why you're obsessed with thighs. This came out of nowhere."

"Right," Marks says way too quickly.

"It didn't?"

"I don't want to talk about it." She huffs. "I gotta go. I got a project to finish for work."

"Text me later." We say our goodbyes, but I can't help but think something is up with my best friend. She has been distracted lately.

I finish the last few stitches of the second pocket.

I check the dress over, happy with my work.

I grab it, taking it downstairs to find Cosima, but first I'm going to swing by Warren's office and steal a kiss.

I hear soft murmurs when I enter the hallway that leads toward the front entry where Warren's office is.

I pause when I see a handful of girls around my age lingering in the entryway. What the hell is going on? I watch a blond girl leave Warren's open office doors before Brian, one of his men, motions for another to enter. I can't help the jealousy that rears up inside of me.

Since Warren and I are on this effective communication kick, I decide that I'm going to find out exactly what's going on. I make my way to where the girls are

congregated. Gone are the days that I don't ask questions around here.

A few of the girls standing in line look at me. I paste on my friendliest smile even though I'm not feeling very friendly at the moment. I slide in behind them, hoping Brian is too distracted to notice.

A few seconds later, I see Cosima about to walk by, but she pauses too. Her brows furrow together, and I'm sure she's wondering the same thing I am. When she spots me, she comes to stand next to me.

"What's happening?" she whispers.

"Not a clue. That's what I'm trying to figure out."

Cosima's lips press together, and she doesn't appear happy. She stares at me; her eyes shift back and forth to the girl next to us, silently telling me to talk to her. I give her a hard stare right back, telling her to do it.

"Holy shit, who is that? He's fucking hot," a girl behind me says to another. I follow her line of sight and now see Z; he too appears perplexed about what is happening here.

"Cosima," he barks, making half of us jump. Z is always calm and kind of funny for the most part.

"What did you do?" I ask without moving my mouth so Z can't tell I'm talking to her.

"Who knows? I breathe, and he's got a fucking problem with it."

"Watch your mouth." Z eyes all the girls.

"How about you watch your eyes?" Cosima snaps back at him, causing everyone to turn and see what is happening.

"Someone can't watch their own eyes," the girl who called Z hot says with a smugness that I know is to dig at Cosima and try to get Z's attention. Cosima swings around to face the girl but doesn't get a chance to respond to her. Z beats her to it.

"How about you mind your own fucking business and get the fuck out of here?" He points toward the double front doors. The girl lets out a small gasp.

"I'm here to see Warren. I was invited."

"Okay, yeah, you can leave."

Her nose scrunches. "And who are you?" Her eyes roam me up and down.

"The lady of the house." Isn't that what Marcello called me? It's so ridiculous that I can't help but laugh. I can't believe I said that.

"Yes, she's the lady of the house." Cosima folds her arms over her chest.

"You." Z points to the girl. "Get gone or I'll have you physically removed." His finger swings over to Cosima. "You stay put."

"You stay put," Cosima mimics while rolling her eyes. I see a tic form in Z's jaw.

"Whatever. I didn't want to be friends with whoever this girl is. I only wanted to see Warren Marino." The girl stomps toward the front door, her heels loud on the marble flooring.

"I'll go see what the hell is going on." Z spins on his heels, heading into Warren's

office. Cosima and I glance at each other before we quickly follow after him. We want to know too.

"I'll move all I want," Cosima mutters under her breath. Since when did she and Z have so many issues? I remember them getting along years ago.

"The hell are you talking about?" Z is staring at Warren.

"I'm doing interviews." Warren stands when he sees me enter his office. I go straight to him.

"Do you need an assistant?" I can't see Warren having an assistant, but he might need one for paperwork.

He doesn't speak a ton about his work, but he works from home more often than not.

But I do want to know why all the girls are all around my age from what I could tell.

Why isn't there a mix of people of different ages?

"No." Warren sits back down in his chair, pulling me into his lap.

"I can assist you." I play with the collar of his buttoned-up shirt, undoing the top button.

"You do enough." He kisses my cheek.

"This is really sweet and really gross," Cosima says while watching us.

"I told you to stay put." Z shakes his head. "You never listen."



“You don’t get to tell me what to do!” The two of them glare at each other.

“When do you go back to school?” Z asks her. Cosima flinches like he struck her.

“Like you don’t know. And why are you even here? The wedding is over. Why don’t you scurry back to your bachelor pad?”

“I’m here because I have to keep an eye on you.”

“I’m an adult. I don’t need you to keep an eye on me.”

“You don’t act like it,” he fires back. Both Warren and I watch them, our heads swinging back and forth to see what will be said next. I honestly have no clue who will win this showdown, but I get a sense that there really won’t be a winner.

“Both of you knock it off,” Warren tells them.

“Yeah, let’s get back to why there is a herd of young girls in the entryway.” I turn my attention back to my husband.

“Wait until you hear this,” Z mutters. Warren must have told him before Cosima and I followed him.

“What?”

“I had a group of women your age vetted, and these are the ones that were cleared to come for the interview.”

“Vetted?” I have no clue where Warren is going with this.

“Screened. I had them looked into and portfolios made,” Warren says as though this

is supposed to clear everything up for me.

"For what?" Why is it so hard to get an answer when Z got it in seconds?

"I'm interviewing possible friends for you."

I stare at my husband. It takes me a few seconds to even comprehend his explanation. And once I do, I'm still unsure if I heard him correctly.

"What the hell?" Cosima whispers. I'm sure her mind is as boggled as mine.

"You're interviewing possible friends for me?" I repeat, wanting to make sure I have this right.

"You said Marks was your best and only friend." Warren shrugs as though him holding interviews to find me new friends isn't the most outlandish thing.

"Oh my God." Cosima starts to laugh.

"Are you trying to find me new friends overall? Which is insane," I quickly add. "Or are you trying to replace Marks?" While I think his actions are the most adorable thing I've ever heard, I'm starting to suspect they aren't just to get me new friends.

"If a better so-called friend comes along, then I'm sure that person would then take this best friend spot. No?"

"I can't." Cosima laughs even harder, practically doubling over at this point.

"Warren." I take his handsome face in my hands. "That is not how that works. You don't interview friends."

"Why not?"

"Friends happen naturally." Holy crap, I love this man. He really does want to make me happy so he can keep me right next to him.

"I can be her friend, but you won't let her go anywhere." Cosima is quick to chime in.

"You don't need to shop every two seconds," Z tells her.

"And you don't need to run your mouth every two seconds either, but here we are. Why are you not shutting the fuck up?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm*

“Watch it,” Z warns her, his expression turning really pissed off. Cosima does have a special skill set to get calm Z to be, well, not so calm.

“Do you want to go shopping?” Warren ignores them, his attention on me.

“It might be fun to hang out.” I shrug one shoulder.

“Might? I’m right here.” Cosima motions up and down at herself, making me laugh.

"All right." Warren lets out a small sigh. "I'll have something arranged."

"I'll go with them." Z steps forward.

"No! He'll ruin everything." Cosima stomps her foot.

"You're a spoiled brat, you know that?"

"And you're an asshole." Cosima gives him the sweetest smile. "Did you know that? I'm guessing you do."

"Enough!" Warren barks at them. "I've had enough of all this. Everyone out of my office." I know he's not speaking to me because his hold on my waist tightens.

Both Z and Cosima leave Warren's office, bickering back and forth.

"Brian," Warren calls. He steps into the room. "Have the women removed from the property."

"Yes, sir." He gives a nod before disappearing back through the door, closing it behind him.

"You know—" I shift in Warren's lap to straddle him. His hand goes to my thigh, pushing it up under my skirt. "A lot of wives wouldn't be too happy about their husbands inviting a herd of young women into their house." I lift a brow.

"It was for you."

"Okay, do you have any friends? Should I invite a bunch of men over?" The growl that leaves Warren is immediate.

"Over my dead body." His hands slip to my ass to grip and pull me closer. Warren's cock presses against my sex.

"It is really sweet that you tried to find me friends; I'll give you that, husband of mine. But I'm happy with Marks, and if I do want to make friends, I'll have to leave the farm."

"Is this important to you?"

"Today? No." I shake my head. I rather enjoy being locked away with Warren, but this is our honeymoon-ish bubble.

"But with time, that will change, I'm sure.

You can't keep me stowed away forever." Warren starts to speak, but I cover his mouth with my hand.

His brows lift, I'm sure in surprise, because who would dare to cover War's mouth?

No one. They'd likely lose that hand. "I know you technically can keep me locked away forever, but if you haven't noticed yet, you have this little quirk. " Warren pulls my hand down.

"Quirk?"

"Yeah, quirk." I smile. "Of wanting to make me happy."

"I rather enjoy it when you're happy." Warren pulls down the straps of my dress. "Have you been reading any new books?" That wasn't what I thought he was going to say.

"Why?"

"You told me that you picture me when you read them, no?"

"I do." For a long time, the heroes of my books were faceless. That was until Warren entered my life, and then my mind started to fill that face in with his.

"The last one, he had her under the desk, sucking his cock." Heat rushes to my cheeks and pools deep in my belly. Warren might be new to sex, but the man isn't bashful or shy. "Only wondering if you had a new fantasy."

"Really?" I duck my head, peering up at him through my lashes.

"Yes, really." His fingers find the zipper in the back of my dress.

When he pulls it down, it makes my breasts spill free.

The tight material is no longer able to hold them.

"I want you to find one you enjoy. Then, you'll read it to me.

" Warren's hands cup my breasts, his thumbs stroking my nipples, making them harder.

"Then what?" I gasp when he tugs on one of my nipples.

"Then I'll make it a reality." He leans in, sucking my nipple into his mouth.

"Warren." I sink my fingers into his hair.

He doesn't respond to me; his mouth is busy giving my other nipple the same attention.

I reach between us, finding his belt. "I used to fantasize about you one day seeing me in the house, and in a lust-endowed moment, you'd drag me into your office where you'd lose control and take me without thinking.

That you needed to be inside me so badly you couldn't help yourself. "

Warren stands abruptly, pushing me down onto his desk. Things scatter to the floor.

"I could have taken this years ago?" He yanks my panties down my legs, pushing my dress all the way up before he undoes the button of his slacks, freeing his cock.

Warren grabs my hips, pulling me to the edge, while guiding the head of his cock to my entrance.

"Careful what you wish for, little mouse. " Warren slams into me.

I gasp. His hand covers my mouth as his body pushes mine down into the desk so I'm

pinned beneath him. "Can't let anyone hear." He latches on to my neck, sucking, thrusting in and out of me. "They might try to come and save you, and I'd have to kill them."

I whimper against his palm as he keeps thrusting in and out of me. Warren still has all of his clothes on, while I'm practically naked. With each thrust, his pelvis grinds against my clit, doubling my pleasure.

"That's it, little mouse, flutter that pussy around my cock.

I know you like it, that you want this." He continues moving in and out of me.

Between his dirty words and the way his cock is filling me, it's more than I can take.

The orgasm bursts through my body, Warren's hand soothing my moans of pleasure.

He thrusts deep and hard, moving the desk under us as he comes inside of me. His body jerks, and I feel his release spill into me.

His hand slides away from my mouth. "Little mouse." Warren's breathing is labored as he presses kisses to my neck and then my mouth. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" He brushes some of my curls that came loose out of my face.

"No." I wrap my legs around him and slide my hands up his chest to around his neck. "That was amazing."

He smiles down at me. His eyes are soft and warm, putting an expression on his face that I know is reserved for me alone.

"I look forward to what my wife comes up with next."



“What about you? You don’t have any fantasies?”

“I do.”

“Well, don’t hold out on me.”

“My fantasy is you, little mouse.”

### Chapter Twenty-Six

#### WARREN

“What do you think of this one?” Tova comes out from the closet, this time in a blue dress. Her shoulders are bare, the top part fitting her like a second skin. When it reaches her waist, it flares out.

I’ve noticed she favors dresses that cling to her chest; she told me it was so she didn’t have to wear a bra, which I rather enjoy. However, when we’re going to be around others, I find I don’t care for others staring at her.

“It’s pretty.”

“You’re not very good at this.” She scurries back into the closet. “And this is your fault!” Tova shouts.

“It was an accident.” When I’d come up to change for the evening, she’d been in a white dress; it reminded me of our wedding, and I might have been overzealous. She had no complaints when she was coming on my face and then my cock. I broke the zipper, but in my defense, it was hidden.

“What about this one?” she asks, coming back out of the closet. “I know this isn’t your thing, but what do you think?”

“That’s the one.” No, this isn’t my thing. The dresses appear the same to me for the most part in different colors; this one is different. It stands out from the others. “This

one is more you.”

Tova’s whole face lights up, and she jumps at me. I catch her, pulling her into me. “Careful.”

“Lift me higher,” she demands, and I bring her eye level to me.

Tova starts kissing me all over my face.

“I made this one.” Fuck me, does my chest ache when she lights up this way and it's directed fully at me.

It soothes something deep inside of me that I don't understand, but I find it doesn't matter.

I know it's all because of her, and I also know I enjoy it.

"Okay, put me down." She wiggles her small body against me, rubbing against my cock. "Oh my God, you're hard again." Tova laughs.

"Maybe I don't want to put you down."

"We can't hide up here forever, and I want to check on things. I am the lady of the house, after all." Tova gives me a mischievous smile.

"Fine." I put her down on her feet.

"How fancy are these people that are coming?"

"They are only people, little mouse. Don't worry over who they are." I don't want her to get herself worked up over it, and I know she will. The mayor is one of the guests.

This is, after all, what my father wanted.

I don't want to deal with this tonight. Another one of our warehouse containers was broken into; this one, however, was empty.

There had also been a fire lit behind one of the apartment complexes we own.

I don't know if that's connected or not.

It was caught and put out before any real damage could be done.

"I know, this is just my first event as your wife. I don't want to end up put away somewhere."

"Don't be a little brat." I give her ass a small smack.

"I'm only teasing." Tova presses a kiss to my mouth, and I put her back on her feet. She takes my hand, and I let her lead me out of our room and downstairs, where she breaks away to go talk to Chef Marcello.

Over the past few weeks, she's been relaxing more and not tiptoeing around the house like she doesn't belong here. Tova is finding her footing, and she was right about letting her be friendly with some of the men who work with me.

The other day, she made Turner a bouquet of flowers to take home to his wife when she heard she wasn't feeling well. Turner had asked if it was okay to give his wife, Sofie, Tova's number to thank her.

It reminded me of what my little mouse told me about making friends naturally, and I agreed. Turner's wife did text her, and they have been texting ever since. It turned out Sophie hadn't been sick after all, Tova had informed me; she was pregnant.

Then she swore me to secrecy, because they weren't telling people yet. I promised her I wouldn't tell a soul. I guess my little wife thinks I'm into gossip. It's only interesting when I'm hearing it from her.

I pull out my phone to check on a few things, still watching my wife flutter around the kitchen.

“War.” Becca greets me. She must have already been here. Likely chatting with my mother.

“Evening.” I give a standard smile. Tova told me it might make me appear more friendly if I would smile at people. Who better to test the theory with than her mother? I see Tova glance our way. “How are you?” I ask Becca, and Tova smiles, then goes back to arranging food on a tray.

“I'm doing very well. I wanted to thank you. Tova has been glowing since the two of you got married. I've been rude.” Her words surprise me.

“There's no need to apologize. I don't blame you. You were forced to do something you didn't want.” I turn my attention to my wife. “I could have never done it.”

“Thank you,” Becca says again, putting her hand on my arm, pulling my attention back to her. “She always had a crush on you. I suppose it was meant to be. All of it really.” She gives me a genuine smile. “And thank you for not telling her.”

“Telling her what?” I ask. Now she really does have my full attention.

“You know.” Becca glances around. “That it was your father who gave her to us.” What is she saying? “We could never have children, and then a miracle came along, and we got Tova.”

“She is special,” I respond, making no promises. I have no fucking clue how to handle this delicate bomb Becca has placed in my hands. She doesn’t know it, but this is a hell of a fucking way for her to get some revenge on me for laying claim to her daughter.

“You guys are talking about me,” Tova says playfully.

“About how special you are.” She wraps her arm around my waist, and I put my arm over her shoulder. Tova rests her head on me.

“Well, don’t stop because I’m here.” Tova laughs.

“The flower placements are lovely,” Becca tells her, wanting to change the subject.

“Oh, you’ve seen them?” Tova slips out of my hold, eager to speak of her flowers with her mother. They both head toward the formal dining room where she’d put them earlier today. I wait for them to disappear out of sight before I go in search of my father. I find him and my brothers in the library.

“I need a word with our father.” Z’s brows rise while Ronan, who could give a shit less, heads for the door. My father speaks once they leave the room, closing the door behind them.

“I take it this isn’t about the docks or the fire.” No; if it was, I wouldn’t have cared if my brothers were here. This is different. Really fucking different. I have a lot of questions about Tova, and I need my father to begin answering them.

“You’ve withheld information about my wife from me.”

"I don't find the information worth noting." I stare at him. "Do you?" He stands from the oversized chair he'd been sitting in. "Does it really matter? Z is your brother even

though he came to us under different circumstances. Is he not?"

"That's not the point. You used this to push the Sullivans' hand in giving their daughter over to me."

"I did what I needed to." I fight not to ball my hands into fists, to give away anything, but I'm finding that's not so easy anymore when it comes to Tova. I can be rather unpredictable.

"And that is where the problem lies." I take a step closer to my father. "Will you try to do the same to me?"

"No, there is no need."

"I don't believe you." Which means I might have to tell my wife this information. Even if my father swears to never utter a word of it, I still have this sense of betrayal. A feeling that I'm lying to her. I never want there to be anything between us. No secrets.

"I'll admit, I used Tova, but that is done."

"For now?" I take another step closer to my father.

"No, the task was accomplished with you two simply marrying."

"I'm not buying the storyline any longer about this being about making me appear more friendly to get other clients to deal with our family or whatever pony show you think the public needs to see."

"That isn't why I did it." I'm getting sick of these word games.

"Dario." We have never stepped past the point of father and son, but I will if need be. Tova is off-limits to everyone.

"You needed purpose. You think a wife can be a weak spot?

Do you think it tames you?" My father shakes his head back and forth, making his way over to me.

"What you don't realize is it makes you only that much more deadly.

You, my son, needed a reason to live." His hand comes down onto my shoulder. I think my father had his own reason as well. He wants to make sure that I stay solemnly planted in the gray. That I don't want to make things too clean.

"That's how you see it?"

"It is." He nods.

"That I'd kill you to save her."

My father smirks. "And I'd kill you to save your mother." He gives me a shoulder squeeze. "But she'd kill me right after, so I suppose you're safe." With that, he leaves the library.

"Is everything okay?" my brother asks, stepping into the library. Z is right behind him.

"I don't know." My father's words linger in my mind; he's not wrong.



### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### TOVA

“Y ou always make me be the decoy,” Cosima huffs.

“I let you pick out our outfits, and I’m wearing pink! And there is a bow in my hair. I didn’t know they even had accessories,” Marks snaps back, like she gave over a kidney because she has to wear pink.

“You look adorable.” Cosima says it like an accusation. “You should be thanking me.”

“You know people die by friendly fire,” Marks informs her.

"Are you threatening me?" I have to bite the inside of my cheek to not laugh. The two of them together can be comedic gold. I’m loving that they are getting along—well, in their own way.

"I'm only stating facts."

"I'll have you know I was the best archer in my class."

"Archer?" Marks and I say at the same time.

"I got mad skills with a bow. What can I say?" Cosima shrugs.

"It's not that; it's that we didn't know there was archery in school," Marks mutters.

"Fancy private school. You know, the type we don't know anything about," I tell her.

"That's right. Switzerland."

Cosima asks, "How did you know?" Marks tends to know a lot of things.

That better be something she learned while digging into my life when she was worried about me.

We don't need a reason to put Warren's target back on Marks.

Cosima switches her weapon in the middle of the game, only to be shot while in the process.

"Freaking rude." She drops the controller.

"It wasn't me, I swear, but hold on." My eyes go to the screen to watch Marks shoot the person that shot Cosima before killing off the other two.

"We won!" Cosima claps. "I guess I do make great bait." I can't help but burst into laughter.

Cosima and I have taken over the library. Warren even had a TV brought in so we could play with Marks. He was quick to make it happen, which surprised me with him not being a giant Marks fan, but Cosima let me know it was to stall our shopping day.

I had kind of forgotten about that. I must be used to just always being here.

There are always things to do. Cosima, however, is going stir-crazy and is in no rush to return to Europe.

I'm not in a hurry for her to go either.

We have gotten close over the past few weeks, which is also how she and Marks started becoming friendly.

"Wait, how did you know about where I went to school?" Cosima playfully demands. She cocks her head, her brows pulling together. She has never looked more like a Marino than at this moment.

"You want the truth or you want me to make some stuff up?" Marks asks.

"This sounds juicy, and I'm here for it." Cosima rubs her hands together.

"I just want to preface my actions by saying that I didn't go looking for information because I was being nosy. I was worried about Tova."

"So you were digging into my family." Cosima glances over to me, that playfulness falling away again.

"She got busted," I tell her. "And as you see, still my friend."

"How did you dig into us?"

"Let's just say I have a particular set of skills."

"She's a hacker, like Z." I cringe. Marks was already on to someone with tech skills in the house.

“Yeah, like Z,” Marks confirms.

“We’re friends now, right, Marks?” Cosima smirks.

“You want something, don’t you?” Marks laughs.

“I want revenge!” Cosima jumps up from her seat.

“Oh, God,” I mutter to myself. This is not good, and I’m sure it’s not going to win Marks any points with Warren either.

“Oh, I love revenge. I’m in.” Marks is fully on board without any details.

“Seriously, Marks? You don’t know what she wants you to do.”

“Girl power.” I believe she’s in it for girl power, but there is more. I know her too well.

“Really?”

“Okay, and the tea. A revenge story comes with all the tea, and I love reality TV. If I can have the real thing, sign me all the way up.”

"I don't think this story is as juicy as you think. It's on her brother, who she is always arguing with."

"He's not really my brother," Cosima says, shocking the hell out of me.

"Okay, there is tea here. Tea I didn't know about!" I'm going to murder my husband. How did he not tell me about this?

“Shit, why did I say that?” Cosima drops back down into her chair. I’ve read one too many romance novels for where my mind is now going with the two of them. Z is more controlling and overbearing with Cosima than either of her brothers.

“You got the hots for him,” Marks blurts out. “Okay, maybe I’ve read too many romance books.” Of course, Marks plucked those words right out of my head.

“What? I didn’t say that. He’s a jerk, and I think he’s inside my phone, and I want him out,” Cosima says extra defensively.

“All right; however, if your Z is indeed who I suspect, that may prove to be quite challenging. I will require the actual phone.”

“Really? You’ll look? Get him out of it?”

“I’ll take a peek, but I don’t know if I can get him out of it. Like I said, I’ll just have to see. Zero is pretty unstoppable.”

“Marks, you said you wouldn’t.” I’m leery about this entire plan. Warren already isn’t Marks’ biggest fan, and if he finds out she’s digging into Z, I know he will not be happy.

“I didn’t dig. He’s the one still sniffing around about me. Zero should clean up better after himself.”

“Right.” I roll my eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I didn’t!”

“Wait, she can see us?” Cosima spins around, trying to find where she might be watching us.

“I’m not watching you; I just know Tova.”

"Oh, okay. So back to my phone. It can't be mailed to you." Cosima and I say it at the same time.

"I came to your city when you ghosted me. I'll stick around for a bit."

“I didn’t ghost you.” Warren took my phone, and maybe she slipped my mind for a second, but things got crazy, and I had too much champagne.

“We’ll meet you,” Cosima cuts in. “You trust her, right?”

“I trust her.”

“Then, we meet her.” Cosima smirks, snapping her fingers. “The shopping trip. That’s a good cover.”

“I can’t lie to my husband.”

“We’ll still shop, obviously.”

“I hate shopping,” Marks mutters.

“You’re on the phone. No shopping for you. I clearly need to be in charge of this operation.” Cosima glances at me. “Or you roll out a window while we try to do it.” Both she and Marks burst into laughter.

“Shopping places don’t have windows that open and close,” I say dryly. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't laugh with them. I'm not indulging in this, though I do love that the two of them are clicking.

“I still think you’d find a way.” Cosima shakes her head at me.

“She would,” Marks says through laughter.

“Are you two done?” I ask.

“Done? We’re just getting started.” The wicked smile on Cosima’s face makes me wonder how much we’re all about to bite off and chew. I know it’s definitely going to be more than we can handle.

“I don’t want to know any of the details of the phone handoff or the meetup.

As far as I’m concerned, this is just a shopping trip.

I’m not lying to Warren.” If they don’t tell me any of the ins and outs of their plan, then I’m not being untruthful to Warren.

At least that’s what I’m telling myself.

“I see where you’re going with this. It’s probably best if Marks and I plan the shopping trip,” Cosima uses air quotes. “That way you have plausible deniability and all.” She smiles wide, so damn pleased with her little plan.

The last thing I think this shopping trip is going to be is little.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

#### WARREN

This is what I get for being nice. I should have killed the little shit that night. He's been a pain in my ass for the past month. It's now time for his own father to take responsibility for his son's actions.

Bobby is now a disgraced officer. When I'd found out it was him playing games and pitching a fit over the fact he'd been banned from Bourbon Street and the punishment I'd doled out, I had the police chief fire his ass.

It was a light punishment. The punishment consisted of a couple of broken fingers and a face that had seen better days. I could have thrown him in the river, but I called his dad, who said he'd take care of it. That didn't happen, so now it will be handled my way. Once and for all.

"Fucking hate technology," Ronan mutters to himself, glaring at his phone.

"Are you all right over there?" Ronan is leaning back on the couch in my office, his feet kicked up on the table.

"Could my thumbs be too big for my phone? I'm always hitting the wrong shit, and now I think it's freezing."

"Have Z take a look at it."



"Have me look at what?" Z comes strolling into my office next.

"His phone."

"It's fine." Ronan waves him off.

"Don't want me to see what kind of porn you watch while you're jacking off?" Ronan flips him the bird. "And this isn't a barn." He knocks Ronan's feet off the table.

"I'm going to fuck you up if you keep doing that shit," Ronan warns him.

"Can't do that. I'm the one with the charm and handsome face.

" Z winks at him. "But I will say, I loved your work.

" He grabs the tablet off my desk. "What the hell happened to this?

" He shows it to me. The screen is cracked.

I shrug off the question. That happened when I fucked my wife on my desk; the iPad was a casualty.

"It still works."

Z clicks away on the tablet, lowering the TV over the fireplace and turning it on. He goes to the local news station, where they are reporting on a warehouse that went up in flames last night.

"Beautiful work," Z compliments Ronan, who only grunts a response. "I mean, you needed my handiwork to disable the alarm systems, cameras, and those pesky sprinklers, but you did great work lighting that match."

Ronan ignores him. It's difficult to get a reaction from him. That doesn't stop Z from trying to get one.

The warehouse was an easy hit. Especially with it filled with lumber waiting for transport. We all stare at the screen watching the firemen put out the last of the flames.

"We have reached out to the Timber Woods company, but there has been no word back. This story is still developing," the reporter says to the camera.

"Bet Mr. Woods responded to you." Z chuckles. Yes, he had. I didn't let the question of who lit up Woods' warehouse linger in his mind.

I check the time. We'll be heading out shortly. Mr. Woods thinks the daylight keeps him safe. He insisted on a meeting during the day and at his offices. I let him set these plans. People are caught off guard when they think they're in control. I'll give him that illusion.

"I'm going to check on my wife." I stand.

"Still can't believe you're letting them go." Z's teasing is now gone. There's an edge to his voice, but I'm unsure of the reason.

"I can't keep her locked away forever." I wish I could, but Tova has told me that in time she'll grow resentful. That resentment will be aimed at me, and I wouldn't be able to bear it from her.

"Has Cosima mentioned anything to you about heading home?"

"I am home." Cosima comes waltzing into the room. "But I could get a place in the city."

“Not happening,” all of us say at the same time. I don’t think she’s ready for that.

“Why not? Everyone else has a place in the city.”

“You’re not everyone else,” Z tells her.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” She glares at him. “But maybe you’re right. A whole ocean away from you is sounding real nice right now.”

“Enough,” I order them. I don’t know what the hell has gotten into these two lately, but I’m getting real tired of them bickering every time we are all in a room together. “Get things prepared for us to leave.”

“Wait, everyone is coming?” Cosima glances around at all of us. “I thought Turner was taking us.”

“Brian will be taking you. It just so happens that we have a meeting in the city as well.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” Cosima rolls her eyes. It actually is, but it doesn’t matter. I’m allowing the trip even though I’m not thrilled about it. I know I need to get used to it. I won’t be far away. It’s a step in my progress.

I leave my office, heading up to our bedroom. Tova is standing next to the bed putting things into her purse. Her head lifts when she hears me, a smile lighting up her face. I go straight to her, kissing that smile.

“You see what I picked for you today.” Tova motions to my side of the bed. Both sides might be considered mine since my wife has a knack for sleeping on top of me. Not that I’m complaining, especially if she’s naked.

On the nightstand is a vase with long stems that end at a small, white, ball-ish shape.  
“Thank you.” Tova giggles.

“They’re peonies. They haven’t opened yet. They remind me of you. So closed off, but with time and care, they’ll open up for you. Big and beautiful.” I soak up her words, loving the way she sees me.

“Beautiful, you say? Are you wearing those rose-colored glasses again?” That gets me another little giggle.

“I only wear regular glasses, thank you very much. As I was saying. Beautiful, handsome, whatever you want to call it.” She lifts on her toes, dropping her head back. I kiss her again.

“Are you ready?” Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, but she nods. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s just been a while since I went shopping or anything, really.” She’s right.

“I know. I have some loose ends to tie up, and then we should have a honeymoon.”

“Really?”

“If you like.”

“That sounds wonderful. Wait, do I need a passport?”

“I already have one for you.”

“What? How did you—” She cuts off, shaking her head. “Never mind. So the passport is done.” Tova laughs again.

I return a smile, not sure why that's funny. I will always be prepared when it comes to Tova.

She takes my arm, and I lead her downstairs where Cosima and Z are waiting in the entryway. For once, they aren't fighting. Cosima's attention is on her phone while Z is glaring at her. Brian and another one of my men are waiting.

I open the back seat door of the SUV for Tova. "I'll be fine," she says when I clip her seat belt on for her. Her hand comes up to cup my cheek. "Will you be fine?"

"I'll figure it out." She stares at me for a long moment, tilting her head.

"I know this isn't the right time, and we're always together."

"Not always."

"Okay, not always." Tova laughs. There were a few times I left bed before her and had business to deal with.

Though she will often come into my office and work on her sewing or reading, that ends up turning into sex rather quickly.

My wife enjoys the more erotic stories; they are getting dirtier and dirtier.

Sometimes, she's in her garden or visiting her mom.

Not to mention the library. She spends time there often with my sister and with Marks on a call.

As much as I relish my time with her, I also enjoy the laughter I hear coming from inside the library when they are all together. It makes her happy, which settles me.

“Like I was saying, it’s not the right time, but we’re actually going different places, and I don’t only want to say only bye.

I want to say bye, I love you.” It’s not often I’m taken aback, but it takes me a second to process what she said and the feelings it causes to rush through me.

“Don’t say it back.” Tova covers my mouth with her hand.

She has developed a new habit of covering my mouth when she wants me to remain silent.

“I don’t want you to say it back because I said it.

You just think on it. I know that the L word has always eluded you. ” I pull her hand down from my mouth.

“I love you, little mouse.”

“Really?” Her eyes go soft.

“This has to be love.”

“Or obsession,” my sister chimes in, leaning forward so that I can see her.

“Do you have a seat belt on?” Z says from behind me.

“I love how obsessed you are with me, and I love you.”

“I love you too.” I run my finger over her wedding ring. “Be a good girl for me.” Tova's cheeks flush pink, and I know she’s remembering the chapter of one of her books she read to me last night in bed. One that I was more than happy to make a

reality for her.

“I’ll be good.”

I give her another kiss before I force myself to shut the door. “Brian.”

“I know, sir.”

I nod. He gets into the driver's seat, and I watch them pull out and down the long driveway.

“You all right?” Z asks. I wish I could tell him I am, but I feel unsettled for the first time in a while. I merely nod. “All right, I’ll see you there.” Z puts his helmet on before jumping on his bike and taking off ahead of us.

Ronan pulls up. I slip into the passenger seat. “Is there anything I need to know ahead of time?”

“You want to know if there is going to be a body?” Ronan shrugs. “Do you think we should kill the kid?”

“Kid? He’s our age.” That may be true, but Ronan and I have seen and lived far more than this kid ever could even imagine. He’s a spoiled little shit who thinks he can get away with anything he wants. That his daddy will save him. Little does he know, his daddy may not even be able to save himself.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

#### TOVA

I gnoring all the clothes brought in, Cosima paces back and forth.

We're in a private area of Neiman Marcus that has been marked off for only us.

Which I was kind of happy about. I thought it might be awkward with Brian following us around and watching us change from one outfit to another.

I'm sure he doesn't want a runway show just as much as I don't want to give him one.

"This plan was over before it began." Cosima throws her hands up in frustration. "Has she texted you back?"

"No, but does it matter? She can't get in here." I'm on the fence about how to feel about it.

It sucks because I really wanted to meet Marks.

Everything we have ever done is online. Of course, we've done video calls and such, but this is different.

I have to admit that the guilt over not telling Warren the entire truth is slowly eating away at me.



What worsens it—now that I’m really thinking about it—is that this is what Warren was worried about to begin with when it came to Marks.

He thinks she's sneaky. Not that he used that exact word when talking about her, but he didn't have to.

Now here we are, sneaking around with Marks.

“Now what?” Cosima plops down on the couch next to me.

“You can try on some of the clothes they set out for us.” I motion toward the racks. They had brought in separate ones for each of us. Warren had thought ahead. I’m used to roaming around racks of clothes. There aren’t even tags on any of these items.

“Hey!”

Cosima and I both let out a scream, jumping up. We snap our heads back, the sound having come from the ceiling. Marks is smirking down at us.

“What?” Brian rushes through the curtains hanging over the normally open doorway. He has his gun drawn. He raises it to where we were clearly staring. I glance back up and see the ceiling tile is back in place. “What was it?” Brian walks in farther, keeping his gun pointed at the ceiling.

“Spider,” I blurt out. “I thought I saw one.”

“Sorry.” Cosima gives him an apologetic smile.

Brian holsters his gun. “Do you need anything?”

“Nope, all good. I’m about to get all naked and try these clothes on.” Cosima wiggles

her brows.

“That’s my cue.” Brian turns around, leaving us alone.

“Quick thinking, Tova. Glad to see you’re finally on board for this mission.”

“Mission?”

“Yeah, we named it Petty Badgers,” Marks says, the tile opening again. “Can I get a hand here? I’m in the ceiling, and now after the spider comment, I’m convinced there is something crawling on me.”

“How the heck are we gonna get you down from there?” Cosima asks.

I had no clue how Marks was going to slip by whatever security Warren sent, but I should’ve known better. Of course she’s in the ceiling. It’s actually pretty clever, and I’m sure it took a bit of planning.

“Help me. Let’s move the couch over a bit so it’s directly underneath. Marks, you want us to stand on it and help you down or you want to try to lower yourself?” Cosima moves into action.

Good thing because I’m in some sort of daze or something. I’m not sure if it’s nerves, excitement, or the thought of getting caught that has me feeling this way.

We both lift our hands for her to brace on; she jumps down, and we all almost fall over. “Whoa, we almost pulled a Tova,” Marks teases me.

“Roll out of two windows, and you’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Nope, that’s what friends are for,” Marks says, pulling me in for a tight hug.

“You’re taller than I realized.” This all feels so surreal. I can’t believe I’m finally meeting her in person.

“I know, I got these supermodel legs.” She turns to Cosima next. “It’s nice to meet you.” Marks holds her hand out.

“Hey, I get a hug too.” Cosima grabs her hand, yanking her into a hug.

“All right, all right, but it took me years to warm up to a hug with Tova.”

“And it only took days with me.” Cosima gives her the sweetest smile she can muster. “We’re moving quick, Marks.” Marks laughs.

“Give me your phone.” She holds her hand out again. Cosima gives it to her.

“Try on clothes, or you’re making me a liar,” I order Cosima.

“Twist my arm, why don’t you?” She beelines straight for one of the racks. Cosima has chilled out now that Marks is here to fix her phone, and by fixing I mean extracting Z from having access to it.

Marks drops down onto the couch, pulling things out of her backpack.

She’s dressed in all black from head to toe, making her blondish-pink hair stand out.

Marks’ hair is an almost white-blond that she is always adding colors to.

She never does anything drastic, just a light tint to give it some color. It really works for her.

“I like the hair.”

“I did pink just for you.” I sit down next to her.

"How sweet." I bump my shoulder with hers. “This is nice, being together in person.”

“It is,” Marks agrees but almost appears sad about it.

“You okay?” She shrugs. “Come on.” I bump her again.

“It’s really nice seeing you in person. Too nice.” Ah, there it is. Marks never stays in one place for too long. In her line of work, it’s dangerous. It has to get old, not having roots anywhere.

I wish there was a way for her to feel safe so she’d be okay with settling down. She’s convinced she has to stay moving or things will catch up to her.

“Can I get you ladies...” Brenda, the woman who showed us in here, stops speaking when she sees Marks. “Who are you?”

“She’s with me.” I stand. Shit, how are we going to handle this? Is she going to say something to Brian? Does she have my husband on speed dial and is going to alert him?

“Yeah, that’s Marks; just ignore her. We have to drag her shopping with us.” Cosima’s tone is sugary sweet. “I’ll take everything on this rack, so I’ll need a new one. Do you have other items I can try on?”

“Of course, give us a little time, and we’ll bring in some more.” Brenda beams before quickly going to find Cosima more clothing. We collectively breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that it was a close call.

“You’re good at this.” I shake my head.

“I think you forget that I’m still a Marino at the end of the day.” This is true.

“That should buy us enough time for me to finish with your phone.” Now that Marks is here, I hate that our visit is going to be rushed.

“Ladies,” Brenda calls as she comes back through the curtains. “This is an issue.” There is a cop right behind her. “This officer needs to speak with you.”

“Thank you, Brenda,” Cosima says dismissively to her, almost rudely. Brenda nods, turning to leave us alone with the cop.

“Is there a problem?” I ask, standing up. Cosima holds out her hand to me.

“Who are you?” Cosima asks him.

“I’m Officer Woods.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Who the fuck are you, and where is Brian?” Cosima steps over and in front of us. What the hell is going on? I see out of the corner of my eye Marks slide the phone down to her side.

“I just have a few questions is all.” He gives us a smile. I think he means for it to put us at ease, but it does the opposite.

“Do you have a death wish?” Cosima takes another step toward Officer Woods.

“Don’t move.” Woods pulls out his gun, aiming it at her.

“So you do have a death wish.” Cosima lets out a sigh. Marks gives me a what-the-fuck look. Not over the cop either; it’s over Cosima. Does she have a death wish?! I mean, there’s a difference between mouthing off to Z and someone who is pointing a

gun at you.

“You shut the fuck up!” he barks at her, losing his facade.

“What do you want?” Cosima asks, not shutting the fuck up. Not really that shocking.

“The wife, which of you is her?” He points the gun at Marks and me, motioning between us.

“War’s wife?” Cosima takes another step toward him. He swings the gun back toward her. Has she lost her fucking mind?

“I told you to shut the fuck up!” he shouts at her.

“He looks like he smells: like two-day-old McDonald’s fries left in the car,” Marks mutters to me, which only makes Woods swing his gun back to us. “You’ve got the ring. You’re coming with me.” That gun trains solely on me. I run my thumb against the underside of my ring.

“That’s not happening.” Marks steps in front of me.

“Oh my God.” I push past her. “Yes, I’m Warren’s wife.”

“She’s not going with you,” Cosima informs him like she’s in charge here.

“How about I put a bullet in you and see if that holds true?”

“That would be awfully loud. Draw attention. You don’t want that, do you?”

“She’s coming with me.” He steps closer, putting the gun under Cosima's chin. “You know what?” Woods licks his lips. “I think I’ll take you too.” My stomach sinks. “In

fact, I think I'll take all of you."

### Chapter Thirty

#### WARREN

I roll up the sleeves of my button-up shirt up before loosening a few of the buttons at the top. “Are you going to beat the kid in the office?” Ronan asks.

“Someone is going to pay.” I pull my gun out from inside the glove box. I had Ronan stash it for me. I didn’t want Tova to notice it when I was seeing her off. It would only worry her. I click the safety off before holstering it again.

“Isn’t that why you burned down one of their warehouses?” Ronan checks his own gun.

“That was only an appetizer.” I step out of the SUV. Z is already there, leaning up against the building, fiddling with his phone. He appears pissed off.

“Yeah, some of my shit isn’t working.” He slips the phone into his back pocket, only to pull out another. He flips it in his hand, catching it.

“Is that a problem?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with this.” He nods to the building. “We’re a go on my end. All systems have gone dark.”

“All right.” Z pushes off the wall, heading for the side door.



If Mr. Woods thinks we'd come in the front door, he isn't the brightest, but that much is clear already.

He lets his son sport a badge and abuse it.

Not even in a functional manner. It's rather wasteful.

But he might know his son isn't the brightest and knew he'd be more trouble than he's worth.

Z makes quick work of the lock. "I love that everything is digital these days." He smirks, pulling the door open for us.

We slip in, taking the stairs up the four flights. When we exit the stairs, a woman with thick glasses pops up from behind her desk. They don't cover the wide-eyed expression that takes over her face.

"Martha," I greet her. I'd gone over the building's floor plan along with the staff on Mr. Woods' primary floor, which happens to be at the top. He has the only office on this floor. The others are conference rooms.

"Can I, ah, help you?"

"Did Woods not inform you of our meeting?"

She rapidly shakes her head. "He didn't say he had a meeting."

"Why don't you take your lunch break?"

"I can't?—"

“It wasn’t a question.”

“Right.” Martha opens the bottom drawer of her desk, grabbing her purse.

“Martha,” I call when she goes to pass by me. She pauses, looking up at me. “Congratulations on your new grandson.” The color immediately drains from her face. I hold my hand out to Z; he hands me the envelope filled with cash. I pass it over to her.

“New life should be celebrated,” Z says to her.

“Yes.” She nods in agreement.

“Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? Go spend time with baby Mikey. Buy him something nice,” Z adds.

“Thank you,” she says in a quick, relieved breath. “He brought two men in with him who appear to be bodyguards.” I give her a nod, and she hurries off. I already knew that little fact.

We make our way farther down the hallway to Ethan Woods' office. I push open the double frosted glass doors, letting myself in. Ethan stands from behind his desk.

“Mrs. Noals didn’t inform me of your arrival.”

“Martha took her lunch break early.”

Ethan audibly swallows, glancing at the two men in suits. You can tell they both have guns holstered under their suit jackets.

“Don’t pay attention to them. You need to worry about me.” I step farther into his

office, walking over to one of the bookcases. I pick up the picture of him and his wife. “How is Kim doing?”

“She’s fine,” he responds, pulling at the collar of his shirt. Ethan has a very bad poker face.

“Then she must not know about your visits to Bourbon Street. I know my wife wouldn’t take too kindly to that.” I set the picture frame back down. “Or maybe Kim rather not.”

From what I read about her, Kim is purely in it for the money and high-end cocaine she needs to function every day. Their family really is a pillar of this community.

“She—”

“It doesn’t matter, I suppose. Your membership was revoked along with your son's.” I make a show of glancing around his office. “And where is your son?”

“He’s on his way.”

“Is that true?” I turn my attention to one of the men.

“I’m not sure, sir. He was here earlier, but I haven’t seen him in an hour or so.”

“Wait outside,” I tell them.

“What? I hired them. They work for me.” The men ignore him, exiting the office.

“No one works for you while you’re in my city,” I remind him. I think Ethan is going to need a lot of reminders. “Now, where is your son?” He starts to speak, and I motion for him to stop. “Know that I’m not in the mood for games.”

I thought I was on edge before, but not knowing where this little shit is has amped it.

"Do we really need him for this?"

"You want to do this the hard way?"

"No, no." He puts his hands up, stepping back, but there is nowhere to go, so he falls back into his chair.

My phone goes off in my pocket. The alert is loud. I'd set my phone on silent but have the vibrate on. I reach into my pocket to pull it out. Z's and Ronan's phones start to go off too with the same alert sound. We all glance at each other, pulling out our phones to answer.

"That's not happening." It is said over the line. I know who it is instantly. I've been hearing it come from the library for the last few weeks. It's Marks. Z's and my eyes lock, letting me know he's aware of who the voice is.

"Oh my God." Every cell in my body goes on alert when I hear my wife's voice. They're together.

Get Brian on the line , I mouth to Ronan, who nods.

"Yes, I'm Warren's wife." What the fuck is going on?

"She's not going with you," Cosima says, and the tone isn't her normal playful one or even the one she uses when she's fighting with Z. In fact, she sounds a lot like our mother when she's either pissed or doling out orders. My heart starts to pound. Someone is trying to take Tova.

"How about I put a bullet in you and see if that holds true?" The ice in my veins

melts when I hear Bobby Woods' voice over the line. I turn, pulling out my gun and aiming it at Ethan.

“That would be awfully loud. Draw attention. You don’t want that, do you?” my sister responds.

"What the fuck is she doing?" Z growls.

“She’s coming with me. You know what? I think I’ll take you too. In fact, I think I’ll take all of you.”

Z is already on the move, and I know nothing I say will slow him or get him to wait.

"What's happening?" Ethan has his hands up.

"Your son just killed you both." I fire, hitting him square in the chest. He's dead before his body hits the floor. It was too quick, but right now I don't have time to deal with him.

I head out of the office, Ronan right behind me. I click the phone over to speaker. “Take the body to my warehouse on the southside,” I tell the two men waiting outside Woods's office.

Bobby will pray for death when I get my hands on him. By the time I’m done with him, no one will dare to even utter my wife’s name.

### Chapter Thirty-One

#### TOVA

“Please, you don’t need to take them. It’s me you’re after,” I plead with the officer. I’m not sure he’s a real one at this point, but it doesn’t matter. His badge says Woods on it.

“You’re uninviting me?” Marks huffs, actually sounding offended.

“What it sounds like to me.” Cosima nods in agreement. The two of them have lost their minds. Why do we all need to be taken?

“All of you shut the fuck up,” he barks, clearly frustrated with the three of us.

“That was rude,” Cosima says as though she’s not talking to a crazy man wielding a gun.

“I’m sick of your mouth.” I gasp when he backhands her across the face. Cosima falls to the floor. A whimper comes from her. I start to lean down to check on her, but Woods steps forward, putting the gun in my face. “Don’t.”

Low sobs come from Cosima, making my own eyes burn with tears. “How are you even going to get us out of here?” Marks asks him. “What’s the plan, Legohead?”

Legohead? Where does she come up with this shit? Though the more I stare at Woods, the more I realize that his hair is rather box-shaped. I suppose he does

resemble a Lego head.

"You let me worry about that." He glances to the curtains and quickly back to us. "There has to be an exit." Woods starts to move around the room, searching for one. He obviously hadn't thought his little plan through. It would be hard enough getting me alone out of here, never mind three of us. I'm happy he's distracted; it gives me time to check on Cosima.

I peek down at her. She turns her head so that I can partly see her face. Then she winks at me before turning back away, the sobs returning. She's up to something. I have no clue what, so I'm just going to continue doing what I've been doing.

"He's high," Marks whispers without moving her mouth.

"Fucking hell!" Woods shouts. "We're leaving." He marches back over toward me.

"Think about this." Marks jumps in front of me yet again. "She is War Marino's wife. He will kill you. No, scratch that. He won't just kill you; he'll make you wish you were dead."

"You think I don't know that?" Woods starts ripping at the buttons of his uniform shirt until he reveals his chest. "It wouldn't be my first dance with War." Angry red cuts are all over his chest. They're not new, but they aren't old either. They are still healing.

I take a step back. "Does that gross you out, little mouse?" I swallow, hating that he used Warren's nickname for me. "It was your husband's doing. He's the fucked-up, gross one. He cut me up all while talking about your wedding that was happening the next day."

"So War was telling the truth," Marks mutters for only me to hear. This is the man

Warren said he'd gone to the Bourbon Street to deal with. I want to mutter right back, I told you so , but I keep it to myself for now.

"I'm going to give you matching ones." Woods licks his lips, sending a shiver of fear through me. "Get something to tie them up. They're staying, but you're coming with me." He motions to me with his gun.

"Shut up already. Sick of hearing your whimpers. Your mouth isn't so big now, is it?" He turns his attention back to Cosima, who is continuing with whatever act she's putting on.

"Buy us time," Marks whispers again, her eyes letting me know she is also up to something.

I do exactly that. I begin to pretend I'm looking around the room for something to help this maniac tie my friends up.

"What the fuck is taking you so long?" Woods says after a few minutes, coming over to where I'm standing by the rack of clothes. "I'll do it myself. Get back over there." He gives me a shove back in Marks' direction.

He rips an item off one of the racks, heading back over to Cosima.

"Stand up." He nudges her with his foot. "And hands behind your back." Cosima lifts her head.

"Last chance," Cosima tells him. Woods lifts his fist to strike her again, but she's quicker.

I barely see the knife in her hand before it is jammed into his thigh.



He screams, but he lifts the gun toward her.

She twists the knife, her hand coming up to knock his arm with the gun. “Run!” Cosima shouts at the same time.

Before anyone can react, the lights go out, everything falling into darkness. I expect the emergency lights to come on, but they don’t. Marks grabs my hand, but another hand wraps around my upper arm, digging in.

“What the fuck is going on?” Woods shouts, yanking me to him. I let go of Marks’ hand, not sure what this man is going to do.

“That’s Z,” Cosima huffs. “I can’t go anywhere without him showing up.”

“Shut the fuck up, you stupid bitch!” My heart sinks when he fires the gun twice, making all of us scream. He presses the gun into my side. “Don’t get any ideas,” Woods says next to my ear. I nod. “Turn the lights on or I’ll shoot her.”

Tears start to spill down my cheeks in fear that Cosima or Marks might have been hit. “Do it! I swear I’ll kill her.” The lights flick back on. I blink, momentarily blinded by the light. When I finally focus, I see him. Warren is standing in the doorway, a gun pointed at Woods.

Woods shifts more behind me, pressing the gun into my side.

I’ve seen a lot of expressions on Warren’s face but nothing like the one he is wearing now. It is one of pure, unadulterated rage. I swear his eyes are even darker. He doesn’t blink, watching Woods’ every move.

I can’t control the tears that are streaming down my face, but seeing Warren has also brought a weird sense of calm to me. I know without a doubt that he’s not going to let

anything bad happen to me.

“You’re a lucky man.” Warren's voice is ice cold. “If you’d have killed her, this would have been a lot worse.”

Woods opens his mouth to respond, but it’s too late. The gun isn’t loud. It’s not till Woods is dropping to the floor that I realize Warren shot him in the head.

“Motherfucker.” I spin around, not knowing who is there.

“I thought you wanted him alive. You got blood all over me. I was about to grab him.” Ronan wipes his face with his arm.

Where the hell did he come from? Ronan is the biggest built out of the three men; he shouldn’t be able to move so quickly and in the freaking dark.

Everyone in the Marino family has their own set of skills, clearly.

“That shouldn’t be hot.” I hear Marks say it, but I’m not paying attention. Warren spins me around, lifting me off my feet.

“Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.” I cup his face in my hands. “I’m okay,” I repeat.

“Hey! I was going to buy that,” Cosima shouts at Ronan, who is wiping the blood off her with a piece of clothing.

Warren is ignoring everything, burying his face in my neck. I feel him take a deep breath, breathing me in. I wrap my arms around him.

Z comes storming into the room; he too has an expression on his face I've never seen before from him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" He storms over to Cosima.

"You know, I think it all started when I was four and?—"

"Don't!" he bellows, making all of us freeze.

Cosima is even smart enough to shut her mouth.

"You think everything is a fucking game and joke?" Z steps in closer.

"And you wonder why we keep you in Europe." Cosima flinches like he hit her.

"Do you still think it's funny? You think I haven't put together what you were really up to?"

"He walks over to one of the racks, pushing it over, and then another.

"This game you were playing?" No one utters a word, but Warren does lift his head.

"Got nothing to say?" Cosima shakes her head no; I can tell she's fighting tears.

"All right, that's enough," Ronan says, cutting in.

"Take her back to the farm and give orders she's not to leave."

"Hey, that—" Z cuts Cosima a glare that silences her.

"I'll handle it," Ronan tells Z, who nods before turning and leaving.

“Did he just leave?” I whisper.

“Call in the cleaning crew,” Warren finally says.

His words are directed at Ronan. “Make sure Cosima and Marks get back to the farm safely. I need to be alone with my wife.” It’s then I realize that Marks hasn’t said a word since she called Ronan hot.

I lift my head, looking around the room, but I don’t see her anywhere. What the heck?

“Where the fuck did pink hair go?” The second the words slip past Ronan’s lips, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I know it’s Marks.

“She’s gone.”

“Where?” Ronan demands.

“The ceiling?” Cosima tries to tease, but it comes out halfheartedly.

“She’s Marks?” Ronan glances up.

“Are you okay?” I ask Warren. I can still see that darkness in his eyes.

“We have things to talk about.” Crap, I’m in trouble. “I love you, little mouse.”

“I love you too.” I press a kiss to his mouth. “Now take me home where I have a feeling I’ll never be leaving again.”

“You’ll be lucky if I let you leave the bedroom.”

“Don’t tease me with a good time,” I joke, but Warren doesn’t laugh.

“Too soon, Tova, too soon,” Cosima says.

That’s the last thing I hear as Warren carries me out toward home.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

#### WARREN

I could have lost her. It's challenging for me to process that.

Tova has become my whole world. I'd had a barrage of emotions the whole drive over to reach my wife.

There was only her, and if anything happened to her, if someone took her from me, all I could imagine was utter darkness. There would be nothing afterward.

I've gone from not feeling anything or having any real fears to experiencing all the emotions I've heard others speak of.

Also a rage that was all-consuming. My father had been right.

I am more dangerous. I lost all rational thought in my mission to get to her.

I would have killed anyone without a thought if they'd stood in the way.

My plan had been to take Bobby alive so that I could have my fun with him, but when I saw him with that gun pressed into my little mouse, everything went out the window. I did what needed to be done to get that gun off her.

"It's my turn." Tova grabs the bottle of body wash, intent on washing me. I brought her straight up to our bathroom, where I stripped her to inspect every inch of her to

make sure she was unharmed.

"You don't need?—"

"I do." Tova cuts me off. "Let me love on my husband." That has me shutting my mouth. "I knew you'd come for me. I never doubted that." I would have to be dead not to go to her.

Marks had given us a head start, but my other alert had started to go off as well. The one I have on Tova's ring finger. It monitors many things, heart rate only being one of them. It is technology that Z had crafted himself that helps assess if there is danger.

I can't begin to comprehend how all that shit works, but it did exactly what Z promised.

As soon as I got into the car, a range of alerts began going off.

I'm not sure why Z created it, but when he installed the microchip into the ring like he was doing surgery, I knew it wasn't his first time doing such a thing.

"I told you I would never allow anything to come between us."

"I remember." She smiles up at me. "But I'm safe now." Tova brings her hand to my cheek. I lean into her touch. "You know that, right?"

"No, I don't know that." I'm still on edge.

The adrenaline is still pumping through my veins.

Tova's hand wraps around my cock. I cover hers with mine.

"That's not a good idea," I warn her, unsure if I'll be able to control myself. The way I want to take her right now is not soft and slow. My body is wound too tight. But I don't want to be rough with her after everything she's been through.

"You think that will stop me?" A playful smile lights up her face. How is she so calm? I'm coming undone at the seams. "What do you need from me?" Tova licks her lips. I sink my fingers into her hair, pulling her head back farther for her to stare into my eyes.

"Tova." I try to warn her again.

"You need to fuck me, Warren?" She smirks. "Or does War need to fuck me?" She hits the nail right on the head. That's exactly what I need to do. "What are you waiting for?" Tova steps back, leaning up against the shower wall.

It doesn't matter how many times I've seen her naked; I'm still always in awe of her. My wife is breathtaking. She's too tempting, and I'm too out of control to resist. I pounce, lifting Tova into my arms.

"I do need you," I growl. Tova wraps her legs around me. I need to be inside of her now.

I reach down, guiding my cock to her entrance, and thrust fully into her. A gasp leaves her, and I know I should slow down, but I can't. I pull out and thrust right back in. I'm taking what I need, and she's giving it to me.

"Warren," she moans, her nails digging into my shoulder.

The bite of pain only eggs me on. Another growl rumbles from me as I turn my head, finding her mouth.



I plunge my tongue into it, needing her taste more than I need oxygen.

I want every part of her on me, reminding me that I have her.

That she's okay. That she's safer now because everyone will know the consequences of messing with her.

I drink down her moans of pleasure, my mouth staying on hers as I thrust in and out. Her tight pussy clings to my cock. Logic tells me I should slow down; she's too tight for my rough handling, but still I can't.

"You're too tight, little mouse. I can't?—"

"Don't stop." Tova drops her head back, exposing her neck to me. The urge to sink my teeth into her delicate skin and mark her there too is impossible to resist, so I don't.

I sink my teeth into her, still pistoning in and out. Primal triumph rushes through me. Tova's sweet sexy moans fill the shower, only making me go harder, my cock hitting her cervix, her body taking every inch of me.

I drive into her over and over. Tova's pussy is wet and hot, burning me along with it. I can feel my release coming. I don't slow down or try to prolong it. I need it. I keep my rhythm. Tova's pussy starts to flutter around me, and I know she's with me.

"Warren!" She screams my name, her cunt locking around my cock. Tova shatters in my arms. I come, driving into her as deep as I can, making sure every drop releases right into her cervix.

I bury my face in her neck, trying to catch my breath. "I'm sorry." I kiss the spot I bit, a mark lingering on her delicate skin. Tova is meant to be loved gently and cherished.

Not ravished by an animal that can't control itself.

"Don't you apologize for that," Tova snaps at me.

I lift my head. "We both needed it." Her fingers play with my hair.

I nod in agreement. I'm not sure I can fully speak right now.

Instead I take care of my wife, flipping off the water before slowly putting her back onto her feet and grabbing a towel to wrap around her.

Once we're both dry, I lift her again into my arms, carrying her over to the sitting area, where I place her down on the couch and flip on the fireplace that she loves. I often find her here reading.

When I come back to her, I lift her again before I sit, putting her in my lap. She rests her head on my shoulder. I close my eyes and savor the quiet for a minute, thanking my lucky stars that I'm able to have this with her.

"Are you better now?" Tova shifts to straddle me. The robe I put on her slips off one shoulder.

"I bit you." I touch the spot, both loving and hating that I left it on her.

"It was hot." Tova sinks her teeth into her bottom lip.

"Then leave the biting to me." I pull her lip out from between her teeth and kiss it. A giggle leaves her. I close my eyes and relish the sound. "Your laughter, it always settles me." The sound lets me know she's okay and happy. "You were right; I needed that."

“And that settles me, Warren. Knowing that I can handle you. Take care of you in ways no one else can.”

“No one.” I shake my head. My wife has special powers. She has from the very start. I was always lured to her, my own existence trying to be hers. “But don’t think you’re not in trouble.” Tova scrunches her nose, glancing around the room, not making eye contact. “Little mouse.”

“I got to meet Marks. It was so fun and cool and all the things.” The words tumble out of her mouth, her face bright and excited. Fuck, does it make it hard to be mad about it when she looks at me like that.

“She called me,” I tell her. “She called all of us.”

“Really? I saw her hiding the phone. I knew she was up to something, but I wasn’t sure.”

“I don’t like the sneaking around, but know I trust her as much as I’m capable of.”

“That you’re capable of?”

“I’ll never fully trust anyone when it comes to you.”

She nods in understanding. “We were going to go shopping either way. So it was a good thing she showed up.”

“Tova—”

“Oh noes.” Her shoulders drop. “Not my legal name.”

“I get it, but no more lies.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Tov—”

“Okay, okay,” she says, cutting me off. “But no keeping things from me, either. If I knew there was some issue with a crazy person, I would have stayed home. If you tell me there is an issue, I’ll trust that.

A real issue,” she adds. “Not just a reason to keep me here because it makes you feel better.”

“I hear you,” I tell her. In fact, I hear her all too well. I don’t want to keep things from her. Not only because I don’t want anything coming between us, but I don’t want her trust in me to falter if other secrets come to light. “I have to tell you something.”

Tova’s brows lift. “You can tell me anything.” I’m not sure that’s true, but I want it to be. And for her, I’ll give on this. I’ll give my Tova everything I have down to my last breath.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

#### TOVA

Warren is quiet for too long. “Did you do something that’s going to upset me?” I ask. Maybe I need to help him along. “You’re freaking me out.” A small, awkward laugh leaves me. “If it’s about Z, I already know he’s not really your brother.”

“He’s not. I honestly didn’t think to mention it. It’s not a secret I meant to keep.” So that’s not it. “Does that change things for you?”

“No.” I shake my head. I mean, it made things click in my head about Z and Cosima. They aren’t having sibling fights; no, this is much more than that. “Why would it change anything for me?”

“Not being blood doesn’t sit well with some. There are a lot of people in my world who wouldn’t like or accept it.”

“A world with arranged marriages and top families.” Yeah, I could see that and get why they might have hidden it.

“It never mattered to me,” Warren says. I can see that from him. He treats Z with so much respect, and I would have never guessed they weren’t related by blood.

Warren can be disconnected from his emotions, even thinking he doesn’t have them at times, but he does. They run a lot deeper and form bonds. I could see that when he promised his sister he’d never force a marriage on her.

He might not have understood at the time why he promised her that, but it was because he truly cares.

The way Warren is different in that aspect is why I think him taking over for his family is the best choice. Logic, not old-school rules or beliefs, drives him. Okay, driven by logic when it comes to things not touching me.

“You don’t blindly put your trust or anything into someone because you’re supposed to. That’s a good thing, Warren, a smart and logical thing.”

“I’m not feeling so logical these days.” I can only imagine how dealing with all of his feelings for me has thrown his world off-kilter.

“Are you purposely stretching out whatever it is you have to tell me?” I can see he’s conflicted, which only amps up my anxiety. We have gotten way off topic, and while I love how open Warren is being right now, the waiting is killing me.

“I suppose I am.” His lips turn up on one side in a half smile. “Only you, little mouse, call me on my bullshit and make me hesitate before I speak.” He doesn’t want to hurt me.

“I won’t love you any less no matter what it is you tell me.

” I reach up, my hand caressing his cheek.

“I’m a rip-off-the-Band-Aid type of girl, so lay it on me, big guy.

” I already have the sense it’s not something he did.

No, I don’t think he would have done anything if he feared it could hurt me.

“I found out why your parents agreed to the marriage.”

“I’m not sure 'agree' is the right word.” I laugh. My parents had been very upset. They both have relaxed over the past few weeks, thankfully. I will not be telling them about my shopping trip.

“I suppose you’re right,” Warren says soulfully.

“This is about my parents? What do you need to tell me?”

"Yes, I want to preface this by saying that I didn't know this information when we got married," he admits.

"Not that it would have mattered. I wanted you.

On some level I was pleased that my father was forcing the issue but pissed too because I knew it could make you a target. " Warren shakes his head.

"Don't even." I point my finger at him. "I'm safe, not even a scratch. Besides, Warren, we were always meant to be. It would have only been a matter of time before we came together. I eventually would have wanted to leave. To have a life, and it would have forced your hand."

"I wouldn't have let you leave." That was my initial thought. His father only moved things along.

"I'm in this life. I wasn't born into it, but?—"

"You were born into it," Warren cuts in.

"I guess? My dad has worked for your family, I think, for most of his life."

"That's not what I mean." I scoot back a few inches. Warren grabs my hips, halting me in place.

"I'm not trying to get away, but you're talking about my parents and stalling on whatever this is you don't want to tell me."

"My father saved you. You were only a few weeks old when your birth parents were killed." I stare at him, trying to process what he's saying. "The Russo family had been slaughtered. Everyone except for you. Dario found you still asleep in your crib. He took you."

"Holy shit," I whisper as what Warren is saying begins to come together in my mind.

"He wasn't sure what to do with you, but your father had been working for him for years at this time. My father knew your parents had struggled to have kids, so he gave you to them."

"This is why you asked me about Z, how I felt?"

He nods. "I'm so sorry, little mouse."

"This is a lot to process." Warren gives me another solemn nod. "I'm not mad."

"You're upset?"

"I don't know. It's a lot, like I said, but upset?"

"I shake my head. "Not for me, really. I love my parents."

Even if these birth parents were alive, they wouldn't be my parents.



Besides—" I give him a smile, wanting to reassure him.

"I am where I'm supposed to be. I want a life with you.

I don't want to think about that not being a possibility. "

"Always so sweet." Warren's hand cups my cheek. I lean into his touch.

"You need this sweet," I tease.

"I do," he agrees, returning my smile.

"Let's not tell my parents that I know, for now at least. I would like to know where I came from. Who the Russo family was."

"I will see what I can find. I want to do it my way. Not through my father."

"I trust you to do whatever needs to be done."

Maybe I should be more upset, but today showed me how easy it can be to lose everything. All the people I love are by choice, and I wouldn't change that for anything in this world.

"I do have one more secret when it comes to you."

"There's more?" I laugh. We both jerk our attention toward the bedroom door, hearing a bang followed by a groan. Warren lifts me off his lap, sitting me down next to him. He reaches under the table in front of us, coming up with a gun in his hand.

"Who put that fucking table there?" We hear grumbled a second before the double bedroom doors fly open and Z comes tumbling in. Warren relaxes when he sees it's

him, setting the gun on the table and standing up.

"Why are you in my room?" He turns and points back through the doors. "Did you put that table there?"

"This isn't your room," Warren tells him.

Z is three sheets to the wind, and I don't need to see the bottle of whiskey in his hand to know that.

"Are you sure?" He lifts the bottle, taking a giant sip. "Where's Cosima?"

"Let's get you back to your room." Warren motions for him to go.

"Where's Cosima?" Z repeats.

"Let's go find her."

"I'll find her." He reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. It slips from his fingers. "Shit." Z leans down to pick it up, spilling some of his whiskey.

"Have you ever seen him like this before?" I whisper to Warren, who gives a stiff shake of his head.

"What the fuck is wrong with this?" Z turns, leaving the bedroom. Warren goes after him. I jump up from the couch to see that they've stopped in the hallway. Z put his bottle of whiskey down on the accent table. All of his attention is on his phone. He's angrily tapping at it.

Warren glances back toward me, shaking his head again.

“How about we get you?—”

“It’s not working.” He grabs the bottle of whiskey and throws it at the opposite wall; it shatters, startling me.

“Don’t move,” Warren orders me. I had no plans to. In fact, I take a step back so he knows I won’t. “The hell is wrong with you?” He heads for Z. Please don’t fight, I silently pray in my mind. There’s been enough excitement for one day.

“You know, you know, and you fucking let her go on the shopping trip.” Z steps into Warren, getting in his face. Warren is quiet for a long moment.

“It’s hard, I know, but we can’t keep them locked away, or they will sneak around. The more you try to control a person, the harder they fight.” Z seems to deflate some. “Go sleep it off. Our sister is?—”

“Not my sister.”

“You’re drunk; you don’t mean that.” Oh, I think he does.

“Or you wouldn’t be so upset about it.” I’m going to have to clue Warren in to what’s really going on around here.

His naïveté when it comes to relationships is really shining through.

I can’t wait to see the shocked look on his face when I tell him the truth.

“You don’t fucking get it.” Z shakes his head. “You got the girl.”

“Come on, to bed. There are orders not to let Cosima leave the farm for now. We’re on lockdown.” He goes to grab his elbow, but Z jerks it back.

“I’m fucking going.” Z turns, leaving. Warren watches him until he disappears down the hallway.

Warren closes and locks our door behind him.

“He’s in love with her.” His words surprise me. I guess he’s not as naïve as I thought.

“You think?” I feign mock surprise.

“You know?”

“I’ve been piecing it together. How he is with her. Think about it. Who might you act over-the-top crazy about?” I tap my finger against my lips as if I’m thinking real hard.

“Shit.” Warren glances back toward the closed doors. “What about her?”

“She’s into it, but neither is going to admit it.”

“He’s a ticking time bomb. I have never seen him that way.” I haven’t either. Z is the laid-back, funny one who is wicked smart. “Maybe it is time for Cosima to head back to Europe.”

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “If she wants to go, that’s one thing, but if she wants to stay, this is her home.”

“I might like having her here, too, but I’m not telling Warren that. After him trying to find me friends, he might demand she stay. “You have to let them figure it out. But sometimes a little nudge doesn’t hurt. As you’re well aware.”

“A nudge.” Warren smirks, coming over to me. He lifts me off my feet, and I wrap

my legs around him. “You want a nudge?” He’s teasing and light now. I love this side of him. Who am I kidding? I love all of his sides, even the insane ones.

“I might let you nudge me.” Warren carries me over to the bed, laying me down.

“Might?”

“You still have one more confession,” I remind him. “You think I forgot?”

Warren lifts my hand. “Your ring.” Diamonds encrust the entire band. I love that it’s simple but still elegant and pretty, eye-catching.

“It alerted me shortly after Marks that you were in danger.”

“My ring?” I turn my hand over to see, but there isn’t anything that appears abnormal.

“There is a chip in it.” He appears almost sheepish. An expression I have never seen on his handsome face before. I might call it adorable.

“That’s kind of cool,” I admit.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“No.” Warren’s brows pull together. “What?” I laugh. “Does it give you peace of mind?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down. “Now what about my nudge?”

“Fuck, I love you, little mouse.” Warren’s mouth takes mine before I can tell him I love him too, but he already knows that.

Now I just have to figure out how to get other people around here to realize their love for each other.

I want Z to get the girl, and for Marks to find her hairy thigh man. All in due time. What’s meant to be is in fate’s hands, with maybe a small nudge from me this time. I am the lady of the house, after all.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm*

WARREN

I check the time before closing out my emails, sending the last of the contracts I finalized early this morning.

It was rather convenient when Mr. Woods' company ended up going up for sale. His wife didn't want to deal with it, plus she got the insurance payout.

She was in it for the money. Which she only had for a few months before she OD'd.

I was able to swoop in and buy it out from her at bottom dollar. Which worked well in my favor, seeing as all of my warehouses and docks were filled to capacity.

This made it easier to expand. It was a perk that Mr. Woods had gone up in flames.

I could start from scratch on the land. Now I have finalized those new warehouses as well.

We are growing and expanding, and it appears rather legit to the average eye.

Not that I had anything to do with the downfall of the Woods family.

They, in the end, were the makers of their own demise.

I pass through the kitchen, giving Chef Marcello a nod. He is busy at work making tons of small bites. It's Wednesday night, and Wednesday is girls' night. I already know where my wife is without having to check.

I head down toward her garden. I pause at the entryway, watching her.

The sun is shining down on her, making it appear like there is a halo above her head.

She's in one of her dresses that goes to her knees, the wind blowing it as she picks another flower that will decorate the library for tonight.

Tova goes all out when her friends are coming over.

I love that she has these nights even though I hate being away from her.

When she sees me, her whole face lights up. It hits me right in the chest, igniting emotions in me that only she can. This tiny woman is my whole world. I make my way over to her.

“You remind me of our honeymoon.” I kiss her bare shoulder, which is still sunkissed from our month-long trip where I’d taken her all over Europe, starting in the Netherlands.

I mapped out all the best places to visit for flowers.

Tova loved every second of it. It was her first time being away from home.

I enjoyed watching her experience new things.

How her eyes would light up and the smile it brought to her face.

“Because we made this while on it?” Her hand cups the small bump that has formed.

“Or the flowers?”

“All of it.” I rest my hand over hers.



“It was wonderful. I can’t wait for Japan next. The blossoms will be...” Tova lets out a dreamy sigh. "Perfection." We're going next month. It will likely be our last trip before the baby arrives.

"Not sure I can agree with that. I've been all over the world, and the only perfection I have ever seen is you."

"Oh, whatever." Her cheeks pinken, a shy smile taking over her face. "You already got the ring on my finger and the baby in me. No need for the smooth talk."

"I don't think anyone has ever accused me of being a smooth talker."

Tova laughs. "Probably not."

"But as you said, wife, I already have the ring on your finger and a baby in your belly. I have no reason to lie." She is perfect. Everything about her pulls me in. Tova lifts onto her toes, and I press my mouth to hers. "Are you ready to head out?"

"Yes." She digs her fingers into the front of my shirt. "I'm dying to find out. So are the girls. They want to start making little outfits, and so do I."

"Then let's go find out." I take her hand, leading her back through the house and out the front door.

The drive to the city isn't too long. We've talked about getting a place there so we can stay when needed, but Tova says she's not in a rush.

That she's happy at the farm. If she's happy, then I'm happy. That's all that matters.

“There is no one here,” Tova says when we enter the doctor's front office. “Wait, did you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you did.” She laughs as Dr. Wills comes out to the waiting room herself.

Dr. Wills is the best OBGYN in the city.

I had her thoroughly vetted. She’s married with a few kids of her own.

Which is what I’d wanted: a female that would truly understand the things my wife’s body would be going through.

"Mrs. Marino." Dr. Wills greets my wife first, shaking her hand.

"Call me Tova."

"Tova." She gives her a warm smile. "And you must be Mr. Marino."

"I am." I shake her hand too.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I always enjoy when the partner is extra involved and wants to be hands-on."

"I'm always involved and hands-on when it comes to my wife." I place my hand on the small of Tova’s back.

"He's kind of obsessed with me," Tova says playfully, though we both know it's far from a joke. In fact, the only thing about what she said that is a joke is the “kind of” part.

"I love to hear that." Dr. Wills laughs. "Come on back. I bet you want to listen to the baby's heartbeat and find out the sex."

"Yes, please!" Tova bounces on her heels. "Tonight is girls' night, and we talk books while we sew, and everyone wants to start making baby items."

"That sounds sweet." Dr. Wills opens one of the doors to an exam room.

"It's really quiet here," Tova says.

"Mr. Marino wanted complete privacy." I had. This is a moment my wife has been looking forward to. I want all of the attention on her. Tova is always putting her focus on everyone else. I want this to be all about her.

I also don't want anyone to have access to her.

Dr. Wills and I already went into that thoroughly.

She was a touch skittish at first to work for me, but money can persuade a lot of people, and Dr. Wills wasn't an exception to that. She had surprised me, though, when she asked for her payment to be in the form of a donation to a charity. I respected her even more for that. A lot might call it overboard, but I don't care.

"I'll have you change into this, and then we'll get started," Dr. Wills says before slipping out of the room to give us privacy. Tova quickly strips.

She has ruled my sex drive, and the small bump that has already formed isn't an exception. There is something about seeing it, that it represents her and me together. A life that we created.

I never understood the want for a child. Now I do understand the need. Having children had never even been on my radar. I remember when I was younger my father talking about heirs. I blew it off. Children can be rather annoying and a lot of work. It held no appeal to me.

Once I knew Tova would be my wife, I was flooded with the idea. I needed it. My wife has a way of making things different for me than they once were. I suppose I see the world in a different light when hers is always shining so brightly.

“Don’t be getting any ideas,” Tova teases, putting on the gown. I pick her up, sitting her on the table. “You know I could have gotten up.”

“I know. I wanted to touch you.” She drops her head back. I lean down and kiss her. We’re interrupted by a loud, repeated buzz.

“They’re dying to know, but they’ll have to wait.” Tova rubs her hands together. “I’m going to make them do a baby gender reveal.”

“A what?”

“Nothing.” Tova shakes her head. “I thought it would be fun to do with them since everyone is so excited.”

“I’m sure they’ll love your gender reveal.” Tova has even befriended a few of my men’s wives. They too come to girls’ night. She has brought a lightness to our home, one that was more needed than I realized. “What do you think we’re having?”

“I’m not sure.” I have been trying not to ponder it.

“I think—” Tova trails off when a knock sounds on the door a few seconds before Dr. Wills opens it.

“Are we ready?”

“So ready!” Tova leans back as the doctor gets her ready. I’m not prepared for the sound of the heartbeat. “Ohh.” Tova’s eyes fill with tears. A wave of emotion tries to

crawl its way up my throat.

“Everything is looking great,” Dr. Wills says. I miss a few other things she says. My eyes are on the monitor. That’s our baby. I grab my little mouse’s hand. “Are you ready for the gender?”

“Yes,” I say before even Tova can make her smile.

“You’re having a baby girl.”

“Yes,” I say again.

“A girl.” A tear slips down Tova’s cheek. I lean down and kiss it. “We’re having a girl.” I hear the doctor say that she will give us privacy as she slips out of the room. “How do you feel about that?”

“It’s right.”

“Really? A girl scares some men.”

“It should scare other men that we’re having a baby girl.” Tova bursts into giggles. Fuck, I love that sound.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, little mouse,” I tell her, my hand going to her stomach. “I would love to have all baby girls.”

“Let’s focus on this one for now.”

“For now,” I agree, knowing there will be many more. I can see brown curly-haired,

little girls with glasses. We need more Tovas in this world.

That might be the one good thing I do for the universe.

I hope you loved the first book in the A New Reign Series.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm*

COSIMA

“We are not getting upset about this or apologizing.” I pace back and forth in my bedroom. It might be the adrenaline, but I can’t get myself to calm down.

I’m a mix of emotions, which isn’t a shocker for me. I have never been great at control, especially when it comes to my feelings. I know that and try to balance myself, but in the heat of the moment, I respond in kind. What energy you give me, I’ll give right back.

Hence why I stabbed the guy; he totally had it coming. The jerkoff backhanded me, but I’d wanted him to. I was doing what I thought was best, protecting my friends and my sister-in-law. That is who the creep was after to begin with.

My sister-in-law has only grazed the world my family lives in. She has lived on the edge of it, and Tova is so sweet. There was no way in hell I was allowing some jerk to take her from us. She and I have become really close since I’ve been home from school abroad.

When that man pulled the gun out, I did what my family taught me. I bided my time and tried to keep his attention off Tova. I knew the second he came through the door who he was after. My sister-in-law married my oldest brother Warren, who we all call War.

War has been taking over for our family, our father slipping into semi-retirement. My father has held a stronghold of the city my whole life; it's really all I know. Now War is in his place, and my brother is different from my father.

He is far more deadly in my opinion, but he's also very rational and was intent on making changes and going more legit, and it has been working. Other people haven't been happy about that. War didn't give a shit.

That was until Tova. People considered his affection toward her a weak spot and figured he was slipping. That he wasn't being rational anymore. They made the mistake of trying to go after her.

It didn't play out well for them, and maybe I stabbed someone because they were dumb enough to even hatch a plan to take Tova. These things happen. I should be getting a thank you card, maybe some nice chocolates.

All I got was an ass chewing from Z, but that's par for the course these days. The man is bossier with me than my own brothers, who he grew up with.

I don't get why Z is so pissed about it. I was protecting my family the same way he does. I suppose he doesn't think I'm competent enough. Not everyone can be a genius like him.

Sure, he does it from behind a screen usually, but it's the same thing. Such a double standard. But then again, Z and I haven't been getting along for a few years now. He snaps at me about everything. Not that I'm much better.

I'm not sure when things shifted, but they did. He's more overbearing than my brothers, which is saying a lot. But at one time we'd been close. I would have called him the closest person to me in the whole world and damn do I miss that, miss him.

My whole life, Z has been around. My father brought him home when he was only a young boy. I wasn't born yet. My mom was actually pregnant with me at the time. He grew up with my brothers and was always with them.

Z always was more protective of me, but he also took a more active role in my life



when we were younger. Then things changed. I can't even put my finger on exactly when or why, but they had. He and I can only seem to fight anymore.

When I went off to school in Europe, I thought things might get better, but when I would come back, he either ignored me or was on my butt about this or that. He's had a stick up his ass for a while now. Which makes me always snap back at him.

Today, though, it was different. I have never seen Z lose his shit the way he did. This time I didn't have a smart-ass response. I could see not only the anger in his eyes but worry as well.

It was a fight not to burst into tears after he shouted in my face and then kind of lost it. Which is saying a lot because I had a gun in my face, been backhanded, and then stabbed someone a few minutes prior, and I wasn't anywhere close to tears through all of that.

Even now, thinking about Z's harsh words, my eyes start to burn.

I should go talk to him. Maybe I do owe him a teeny tiny apology for the whole Marks thing.

We hadn't told anyone she would be showing up too.

I may have gone too far this time, but in my defense, we had already planned to go shopping.

Our small side quest didn't change what would have happened.

Plus, if Marks wasn't there and hadn't used my phone to dial them so they could hear what was going on, who knows what would've happened.

On second thought, I don't owe him anything.

I fold my arms over my chest, focusing on my anger and not the hurt that I'm actually feeling.

Also! He was the reason I had to go on a side quest. Z is good with computers. Who am I kidding? The man is a genius with them. I'm convinced he was somehow in my phone. He always knows what I'm up to and is three steps ahead.

So when we went on our shopping adventure, we invited Tova's friend Marks, who I think might be as badass with computers as Z. Marks was going to have a peek into my phone to see if I was right and to also see if she could get him out of it.

I mean, it's not like there is anything juicy on my phone, but maybe a girl doesn't want him checking out their Kindle. Those things are private, but with Z, he doesn't believe in much privacy when it comes to me.

He thinks I can't take care of myself. I hope today finally showed that I could handle myself. I didn't panic, and I did what needed to be done. What did that get me? Screamed at.

I was pretty much told I was a spoiled brat. I can concede that one. I mean, I'm the only girl in this family, or I had been before Tova. It was him saying that I think everything is a game and joke that struck a chord for me.

He might be right in part. I do things to get his attention. I can't deny that. I've turned into the boy on the playground pulling my crush's hair to get some kind of reaction.

You either laugh or cry. I know I use humor as armor. Then when he said, And you wonder why we keep you in Europe , that cut deep.

It made me feel as though no one wanted me here. I had been asking to come back to the States and was pushed off time and time again. It might be for the best if I went back.

I'd miss him. Hell, I miss him when he's right next to me. Thinking about going back makes my heart hurt. It ached the whole time I was gone. I hoped Z would miss me, but it doesn't appear that way.

If it's not already obvious, I am in love with him. I think I have loved him my whole life. I can't pinpoint when it happened, but I swear the feelings I have seem as though they've been there forever. Always a part of me.

I really need to talk to him. To try to iron this out. I would rather not leave things this way. He might be being an ass because he feels it too. There is a lingering tension between us. I can't be the only one feeling it.

I mean, watching my brother and Tova together, Warren was kind of a dick at times, not realizing that he was hopelessly in love with her.

I have always been one to say what I'm thinking, except when it comes to Z.

I should go to his room and speak to him.

I'll never be able to sleep or come to the right decision about leaving if I don't. I can put it all out there.

"I'm doing it," I say, trying to pep myself up. I hurry into the bathroom, fluffing my hair and putting on lip gloss. It's late; if I do much more, it will appear like I'm trying too hard. I'm not going to beg. I only want him to be honest with me. I can't keep living this way.

I debate changing out of my pajamas. It's a sweet little sleep dress that used to hit right at my knee when I got it a couple years ago. It had been one of my Christmas gifts from Z. Now it's on the shorter side, but I still wear it often. It reminds me of him.

I poke my head out of my room to see if anyone is around. This house is massive; even if a lot of people are here, it never feels that way. When I see the coast is clear, I hurry out of my bedroom and down the hallway toward Z's room.

He normally doesn't stay here, but everyone had come back home for my brother's wedding. Now mostly everyone has left, besides me, which is why I think Z stayed. I'm sure he's here to keep an eye on me, making sure I'm not up to anything.

What does he really think I'm going to do? Stab someone again?

When I make it to Z's room, my fist hovers before knocking. I can do this. I give myself another pep talk before knocking. I press my ear to the door but don't hear anything. He might be at his billion computers with headphones on.

I test the knob, and it's not locked. Normally it is.

He keeps his room on lockdown. Was he so mad at me he forgot to lock it?

Slowly I open it to peek inside, expecting to see him at his desk with a million and one monitors, but he's not.

The only light comes from the wall of screens, casting a soft blue across the room.

I slip inside, shutting the door behind me.

If he went to the city, it's going to piss me off. Okay, I will act pissed off, but it's hurt that I will actually feel. With everything that happened today and his worry over me, I was sure he'd come back to the farm. I want him to need to be near me.

I should snoop is the first thought I have as I venture farther into his room.

With the house as massive as it is, everyone's bedroom looks like a small apartment,

just without a kitchen.

I stop walking when I see Z lying on the bed, his arm over his eyes.

I creep forward, not sure if he's awake or not.

I wish I could have fallen asleep. Normally Z is always awake, it seems like.

Gently I sit down on the side of the bed closest to him, not wanting to wake him.

I want to watch him, if only for a few seconds.

As usual, I have no control. I reach out to touch his arm that is thrown over his face.

I never get the chance. Z moves, grabbing my arm and flipping me over and onto my back, pinning me beneath him.

“Z, it’s me,” I gasp. He stares down at me.

“It’s always you,” he responds before his mouth is taking possession of mine, not giving me a chance to ask what he means... but with his mouth on mine, I don’t care about anything else because for me it has always been him too.