



Vow of Vengeance

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The mafia don demands his vengeance, and I'm the one he wants.

A massive stranger enters my room, throwing my boyfriend out a window.

Powerful and dangerous with dark hair, dark eyes, and a jaw set like stone.

He tells me I'm coming with him, and when I disobey

He takes me over his knee and spans me most shamefully.

He's way older than me, and his controlling, dominant ways terrify me.

I'm a virgin, totally naïve, with no clue about sex, submission, or his mafia rules.

Yet his punishments make me so wet, leaving me craving more of him.

Do I follow my desire and marry him, becoming his young wife till death do us part?

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Page 1

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CHAPTER 1

Ophelia

The notification sound from my phone goes off, making my heart beat faster. I know it's him. I grab my phone from the bed beside me, and a glance at my cracked phone screen confirms my suspicions.

Carter:

Leave the window unlocked.

I chastise myself as I mumble, "And for you, Carter... I will."

I delete his text and toss the phone back on the bed with a sigh.

I know I'm worth dinner and a movie, but I keep my standards low. Carter smells good, he's pretty to look at, and he has those V-shaped muscles that run diagonally from his hip bones to his pelvis. He's beautiful, and all the girls at school want him, but I won't go all the way with him.

I do just enough to keep him coming back. And I know I'll open the window.

The truth is: I'm lonely.

Lazily, I moan, stretching my tired muscles as I pad barefoot across the room. I undo the latch and push the window open a crack for good measure. It's been a mild

winter, and the fresh air feels good.

I stare out into the night. The street is quiet here on our end of town. Carter lives in the estates they call the Plaza—sprawling, single-family homes with perfectly manicured green lawns circling a neighborhood park. I've never known what it feels like to have walls you don't share with strangers.

The rumbling sound of a motorbike engine breaks the peace. To my left, I see two kids still wearing their green uniform blazers from our school, riding the raucous bike. A guy is driving, and a girl, her plaid skirt rolled up short as the popular girls do, is perched on the back, her arms wrapped around the boy's waist.

I remain hovering by the window to see if I recognize them.

The girl on the back taps the driver on the shoulder. He slows down and pulls to a stop outside the door to my building. She tugs her helmet from her head and cradles it to her chest.

It's Ailani, the KA LA Hawaiian drinkware tumbler heiress. Groaning, I wish I'd ducked out of her sight below the window ledge, but it's too late. I should have known she spotted me the moment the bike slowed down.

Ailani dates Giovanni, the guy driving the bike. He doesn't bother removing his helmet. He's one of the few Italian kids at our school, and his father is the CEO of a marketing company in Milan. The two lovebirds came into my work earlier, ordering fries and milkshakes.

Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to be the kid on the other side of the counter. Being able to order whatever I want, then pay with Daddy's credit card. Honestly, the entitlement doesn't look appealing.

Ailani shakes her long braid from the helmet, beaming ten thousand euros of veneers at me. “Hey, Opie! Done flipping burgers for the night?”

“Yeah, thank God.”

“You look like Juliet waiting for her Romeo up there!” she laughs.

“I wish. It's just me here tonight. Well... goodnight.” I pull my head back in the window, but Ailani stops me, calling out to me again.

“Speaking of Romeos... I heard you and Carter were a thing.” Her voice tightens as she narrows her brows at me. “Is that true?”

“Carter?” My voice comes out high, off. “Why would you say that?”

She tilts her pretty face up to me and shrugs. “You know how rumors fly around our school.”

She waits for my reply, but I don't have one.

“Anyway.” She lifts the helmet to put it back on. “Keep up the good work, Opie. Those fries were on point.” Her laughter disappears behind the helmet; the giggles aren't altogether cruel but not exactly kind. The two of them speed off.

“Thanks, Ailani,” I mutter to the empty street. “Some of us have to work for our money.”

And why was she asking about Carter? Irritation gnaws at me. Are kids at school really talking about us? I haven't told anyone that he's been coming over. I doubt he's hanging out with his football buddies and bragging about hooking up with me.

We don't even do that much—kissing, cuddling, and crazy oral sex. But I never let him return the favor. It's too intimate with his face down there, and it's messy.

I don't like messy.

Carter is easy. Easy to look at, easy to be with—no drama, no expectations. With Carter in my bed, I get a few hours where I don't have to think about anything. The current state of my life is the last thing I want to focus on.

The night I blew out the eighteen candles on my birthday cake, surrounded by my mother and grandparents, something changed inside of me. I'm supposed to be an adult and make plans for my future, but it's difficult when I don't know my past. I want to know more about my father. What did he do that was so bad no one in my family would speak his name? Why did they move us away from Scotland to Italy, a place no one had ever heard of him?

I flop back onto my bed, staring at the water stain on the ceiling left by a leak from the apartment bathtub above.

The house is quiet—too quiet.

My mom should be drinking her Friday night wine and playing cards with my grandparents in our small dining room. Out of character, the three of them have gone out tonight. A man named Liam invited them for dinner at a fancy place called “the Villa.” I was scrubbing a stubborn stain from our kitchen sink, so I kind of tuned out while she was telling me about it. No one can get the kitchen to my level of sparkle.

I still have the floor to mop. After working a double shift, I'm too tired to clean. I barely had the energy to shower, but I needed to shampoo the smell of fried food from my hair. I'm dozing off when the notification sound on my phone goes off again.

I reach for my phone. It's a reminder that tuition is due on the first of December. My stomach sinks as I hit dismiss. Just this morning, Mom said she'd paid it in full. I asked her where she got the money, and she said not to worry about it. But something feels off.

When we first moved here, I didn't speak a word of Italian. My grandparents didn't want me to feel isolated before I learned the language, so they insisted I attend the International School, a prestigious institution primarily for rich, American expat kids. Grandma helped Mom apply for a needs-based scholarship, which I was granted.

The day I turned fifteen, I got a job to help with the costs of uniforms and supplies. Now, I'm the proud owner of a McDee's apron, a decent education—though I still struggle with my grades, especially in French class—and I even have a tacky American nickname: Opie.

Every time I would enter a room, the kids at my school would belt out the chorus of the melodic song by the Lumineers, titled with my first name, until everyone got sick of the word Ophelia.

Carter calls me Phee, which isn't as bad. Now, Carter's outside my window, whisper-yelling for me.

“Phee! I'm coming up.”

Jumping up from the bed, I cross the room again, pushing the window up the rest of the way. The temperature has dropped since I first opened it, so I hang my head out in the evening air. On the street, he's bent down, his shoulders flexing against the tight T-shirt fabric he's wearing as he locks his black BMX bike. I feel warm just looking at him. I lean further out the window.

“I'm here.”

He glances up at me with a smile of anticipation. "I see."

I love the way he moves. He's all grace and muscles as he climbs the shaky, metal fire escape ladder up to my room. I step back to allow his almost-man-sized frame to crawl through.

We stand there for a moment, sizing one another up. He wears gray sweatpants with the black T-shirt. On him, they look phenomenal.

"Come here." I wrap my arms around his neck. "You must be freezing."

"Nah. My blood runs pretty hot when I'm coming to see you." He smiles down at my pajama pants. "Nice jammies."

I glance down at the cream flannel printed with bright green Christmas trees. "'Tis the season."

"A month early." He slips his arms around my waist. "But sexy as hell. Let's take them off."

Having no plans to lose my clothing, I reach up to kiss him. A sweet yet sour smell stops me. Alcohol?

I pull back, my nose crinkling. "Have you been drinking?"

"I had a few drinks with the guys on the team before I came over. I wanted to loosen up a little." He brings his mouth to my ear, the scent stronger. "I thought we could try something else tonight. Something better than oral."

My body tenses. "What's wrong with what we usually do?"

“I like what we do. You’re good with your mouth,” he chuckles, continuing, “Like, really good.” He brushes my hair back from my face. “But I want more.”

I do not want more.

I like how he looks. I like his easy company. But I don’t want him enough to go there . My arms drop from his shoulders. I flatten my hands against his chest. “I don’t think so.”

He tightens his hold around my waist, pulling me closer as I try to step back. “Come on. It’ll feel good.”

“No. Let’s do our other stuff. Don’t you want my mouth on you?” My hands go to his waist, tugging at the elastic band of his sweats. “You said I was good at it.”

He slides a hand up the front of my loose shirt. My skin dances under the brush of his fingertips.

“Nah, I want you.”

Reaching my bare breasts, he takes one nipple between his finger and thumb and pinches. Hard. Pain dips through me, pulsing between my thighs. He moves in to kiss me, his mouth hot with need.

I let him kiss me. I lose myself in the act momentarily, feeling warm and liquid-y. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, swiping his against mine, then going too deep, almost gagging me. He slips his hand down the front of my pajama pants, then he cups me, fingertips clumsily fumbling at my entrance.

I suddenly feel hot all over, but not in a good way—it’s a prickly heat that burns my face and the back of my neck. I break our kiss and pull away, shaking my head. “I

don't want this."

"Come on." He cups my breast in his palm. "You've been teasing me for so long. You owe me this."

Loose and languid only a moment ago, his words make me tense. "Owe you what?"

His thumb circles my clit, and I find myself cringing. His words turn my stomach. "You owe me this."

My virginity? "Because I gave you head a few times? I don't think so." I squirm away from his touch, but he doesn't back away. Doesn't take his hand out of my pants. He kisses my neck, beer-scented saliva on my skin. He nips at my nape too hard, sparking pain. I flatten my hands against his chest. "Come on," I say. "I'm serious."

His eyes lock on mine. "So am I." He pushes a finger inside me roughly.

A gasp catches in the back of my throat. Something hot in his gaze feels off—determination fueled by desire. The prickly warmth of discomfort turns into a heatwave of panic.

He's not letting me go.

Suddenly, I wish I wasn't home alone tonight.

My heart thrums in my ears; my skin begins to feel clammy. My stomach twists in a sickening knot. This is not the Carter I know. How much alcohol did he have? I've heard it can make some people mean.

For the first time ever, I fear what first attracted me to him: his athletic frame.

“Give me what I need,” he demands.

He palms my other breast, his mouth back on my neck, hot and wet. His finger pushes deeper inside me. Despite my fear and unwillingness, my muscles clamp down around him.

I said no... right? Did I make myself clear? He accused me of teasing him, telling me I owe him. I hate myself for even asking this...

I don't owe him anything... do I?

“Carter...” I trail off.

My bedroom door flies open. The metal door handle hits the wall behind it with a loud bang, echoing through the quiet room and jolting my body.

Carter's hands quickly retreat from me.

In unison, we turn to face the doorway.

A tall, large, broad-shouldered stranger fills the threshold of my bedroom.

Despite the clench of his strong jawline, his expression is one of ease, a man in complete control. Dark hair and dark eyes. He's dressed in a formal business outfit—a white dress shirt ironed with the starch Grandma uses on Grandpa's church shirts, and dark, gray pants. The powerful look is completed with a black belt, polished shoes, and a black, satin tie.

I'm not good at guessing ages, but he's much older than us.

Coolly, he slides his hands into his pockets. His gaze locks on Carter, and his voice is

laced with danger. “You. Out.” When he speaks, Carter and I stand there, shocked and silent. I should be screaming for my mom, but something in his gaze holds me back.

The man continues, “Now.” The word feels like he’s dragging a rake over hot coals.

Carter looks from me to him, uncertainty flashing in his eyes. He’s trying to decide if he should make a break for it or if I’m worth fighting for.

Carter waits a beat too long and then addresses the man, seemingly lowering his voice to match the stranger’s. “Who are you? What do you want?” His tone doesn’t come close to the stranger’s.

“Doesn’t matter. It has nothing to do with you .” The stranger’s eyes find mine for the first time since breaking into my bedroom. Dark. The look we share... I find myself unable to tear my gaze away.

“I’m here,” he says, “for Ophelia.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

CHAPTER 2

Haze

I saw her, I wanted her, now I'm here to take her.

I need a wife. I demand revenge. This girl will give me both.

When I moved to Italy at the age of twenty-five, my boss offered to arrange my marriage. Liam thinks young men transplanted from New York should marry upon arrival. He worries that the beautiful Italian women drawn to the Villa distract us from our work. Lydia, a local vineyard owner's daughter, was offended when I politely declined to arrange a meeting with her father.

A decade later, I'm still single.

I don't do relationships.

I prefer casual, one-night-only hook-ups with women who know I will not be calling the next day or any day after that.

Frustrated by my never-ending bachelor status, Liam's now holding the promotion I want over my head, telling me I'd be better suited for the position if I "settled down." Despite everything inside me screaming to run back to the family branch in New York, I decided to take advice from Liam's sweet, well-meaning wife.

Sitting beside Emilia in her private library at the Villa, I allowed her to create an

online dating profile for me.

The profile was the catalyst for beginning the chain of events that now, eight months later, with no promotion in sight, have led to me standing in the bedroom of an eighteen-year-old girl?—

And a boy standing beside her who'd best get his ass out that window.

“Now,” I say.

The boy asks me what I want.

It's simple. “I'm here for Ophelia.”

Her gaze stays steady on mine—wary but brave.

Petite with porcelain skin, her bright, blue eyes starkly contrast with her dark, almost black hair. With rosy cheeks and lips, she resembles an edgier version of a fairy-tale Snow White. Her long hair is still damp from showering. She wears cream pajama bottoms adorned with Christmas trees and a white tee. Judging by the peak of her nipples under the shirt, she wears nothing underneath.

No makeup, tattoos, or jewelry, other than the unique string of three intertwined strands of pearls hanging around her slender neck that I've been told she never takes off. I want to tear her shirt and pants off and have her stand there in just those pearls, dark hair spilling over her bare breasts. Feeling my eyes on her chest, she crosses her arms in front of her.

My revenge, my retribution in the flesh. My fingers itch to reach out and touch her, to punish her for her mother's actions.

It's wrong—she's only a child. I should punish the mother.

The boy pipes up again, saying something about calling the police. He's like the midges, the non-biting flies we have at the lake—a bother, but not worth killing. My full attention is on the beautiful girl in front of me.

“The boy should be going now,” I say to her. “I’m here to discuss your mother’s debts. I believe she owes me something.”

The pink in her cheeks slowly drains as my words settle in. She knows. She must. How could she have afforded such an expensive necklace?

“My mom...” Her words trail off as if acknowledging her family’s guilt.

Under thick, dark lashes, her attention flits from me to him, then back to me.

She speaks to him while never taking her eyes off mine.

“Go,” she finally says. “I’ll be fine.”

He’s unsure, but with an encouraging glance from me, he’s scrambling over the windowsill, calling, “Call me later, Phee.”

There’s a thud and a groan.

She runs to the window, looking out. “Who are those men? What are they doing to him? Carter!”

“Nothing to worry about. Just a few of my men letting him know he’s not welcome back,” I say, crossing the room.

She moves away from me as I approach. I close the distance between us, shutting the window. I stand before it, blocking her view of the boy on the ground below. Two of Liam's younger brothers gather Carter up and carry him to the back of the waiting black Escalade.

She moves further away from me, pacing to the doorway of her room. At no point does she consider running. With my men outside, there's nowhere for her to go.

She glances down the hall. "My family will be back any minute."

She's a terrible liar. "I don't think so." I know exactly where her family is right now. "I've given them the evening off from babysitting."

"You know where they are?" she questions and eyes me. "Are they safe? Are they okay? What are you doing to them?"

"Nothing. They're perfectly fine."

"Where are they?"

"The Villa at Bachman Villa."

Her blue eyes widen. "The Bachman Villa? I know they said they were going to a place called the Villa, but the Bachmans'? Why would they be there?"

I'm sure she has some preconceived notions about us Bachmans—most do. I humor myself. "What have you heard?"

Looking at the ground, she stutters, "Y-you have branches in New York, Greece, here in Italy. Dangerous, violent. You're some kind of...I don't know..."

Unwilling to say the word, she shrugs.

“Mafia?” I ask.

The color comes back to her cheeks. “Something like that.”

“We prefer to think of ourselves as a family—a band of brothers.”

She drags her gaze up to mine. “What does any of this have to do with my family?”

“They’re discussing our arrangement.”

“Whose arrangement?”

“The one my family is making with yours. Your family owes me.” I eye her clutter-free room. Books line some shelves—all organized by color—her bed is perfectly made, the quilt’s corners tucked in tight. It’s nothing like the messy space I’d imagined. “A lot.”

Looking uncomfortable, she shifts her weight from foot to foot, crossing her arms tighter around her body. Now, she looks as if she wants to run. I should let her go and find the woman who is truly at fault, but the mother would demand some deeper connection from me, which I’m unwilling to give.

“You know something about what your mom has done, right?” I ask.

“I don’t know what I know,” she says, shaking her head and looking away.

“What does that mean?” I wait for her answer.

Finally, she shudders a sigh. “I don’t know what she did to bring you here, but

recently, I felt like something was... off.”

“Like what?”

“My school stopped offering scholarships last year. I’ve got a job, but fast food only covers enough for books and supplies. I was supposed to transfer to the local school for my final year, but a week before term began, somehow, my mom magically came up with the money. She told me she’d paid for this semester. In full.” She stops her fast-talking to catch her breath, then shakes her head. “That school costs a fortune. How did she come up with that kind of money so fast?”

She eyes me, searching for answers.

“And the necklace?” I eye the pearls that hang below the lovely curve of her chin.

“Did your mother suddenly come up with the money recently as well?”

“It was a gift.” Her fingers go to the pearls, clutching them lightly. “From a lifetime ago. Someone gave them to my mom. She gave them to me the day I turned eighteen.”

“June ninth.”

She narrows her gaze. “How do you know my birthday?”

“I know everything about you. And your mother,” I say. “And your grandparents, as well.”

Soon, I’ll know everything about her. I’ll memorize every inch of her beautiful, virgin body, as well as how she tastes. The sounds she makes when she moans in pleasure and when she cries out in pain.

“She conned me out of ten thousand euros.” I bite back the hit to my pride. “Through an internet scam,” I say. “And you’re going to pay it back. Every. Single. Euro.”

“You want me to pay mom’s debts?” Her voice rises. “One semester of tuition is ten thousand? How can I come up with that kind of cash?”

“Ten thousand? It was ten times that.”

Her jaw drops open. It takes her a moment to recover. She says, “I’m eighteen! I microwave burgers for a living.”

She’ll never have to lift a finger when she’s mine... unless it’s to please me. “I don’t need money. The debt she owes me is one side of a two-sided coin. Heads, she will repay the money by giving me something precious,” I say.

“And tails?”

“I want to make her suffer.”

Her eyes flick to mine. Her words drop to a whisper. “That’s cruel.”

“It’s a cold, cruel world. The sooner you accept that fact, the easier it will be for you to join it.”

“Me? Join your world?” Her gaze hardens. “Why do you want me? You know nothing about me.”

I need to touch her. To hold what is now rightfully mine.

I cross the room to her and take her in my arms. I pull her against me. Her body is taut, rigid, stretched tight like the string on a violin waiting to be plucked. To make

beautiful music for me.

I move my mouth to her ear. My words heat against her skin, stirring her coconut-scented hair with my breath. “I know your mother owes me a hell of a lot of money. I know you’re the most precious thing in the world to her.” She begins to tremble in my arms. “And she must pay back the greatest debt of all.”

“What would that be?” she whispers.

“Respect. Your entire family will learn—if you disrespect a man of the Bachman Brotherhood, the consequences will be painful.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

CHAPTER 3

Ophelia

A shiver tears through me. This man is dangerous. My mom owes him an outstanding debt. I am to be the payment. She disrespected a Bachman.

Now, my body is his to disrespect.

His eyes are fire, his jaw set with steel. He is a powerful, dangerous man—a man to be obeyed.

But he hasn't tested me yet.

I have to get away as quickly as possible. His strong arms are a prison, holding me so tightly that I can feel his cold heartbeat, probably pumping ice through his muscular body. His men are outside the apartment. I think of the escape ladder leading from the upper flats past my window to the ground. I can climb it, knocking on the windows of higher apartments until I find help.

There's no way out but up.

Deciding between stomping on his foot or kneeing him in the groin, I begin to push my way out of his arms. I'm surprised at how easily he lets me go. I run to the window Carter just disappeared through. There's no one outside. The street is quiet; there's no reason I can't climb down and run to Ms. Alfano's first-floor flat.

I grip the window, throwing it open. The night air rushes in, cooling my face.

“What about your family?”

His words make my body and blood freeze. My heart drops to my bare feet. I think of my mom, Granny, and Grandpa. He’s said they’re having dinner at the Villa. I picture them tied up, bound, being held by his men somewhere in the dark.

Fingertips digging into the window frame, I turn to face him. “Would you hurt my family?”

He doesn’t answer. He only stares back at me, letting me determine what I can from his dark eyes. I don’t know what he’s capable of, but I’ve heard whispers about how dangerous the Bachman family is, and I’ve already seen him do something to Carter. It’s not worth the risk of running.

I let go of the window, padding warily over to him. I stop a good enough distance away. “What do you want me to do?”

“Good girl,” he croons. “I’m glad you’re coming to see things my way.”

“Don’t hurt my family.” I hold my hand behind my back, crossing my fingers. “And we’ll do things your way.”

For now.

He takes a step toward me, closing the space between us. He reaches out, his big hand cupping my face. I’m surprised by its roughness—the skin of a man who works outside. The gesture is so intimate that it makes my heart race and my breaths shallow.

Having him this close, I'm surrounded by his warm scent, like leather and sandalwood. I could smell it when he whispered in my ear; now it's intoxicating me again. My nipples harden, and I hate myself for it. He can see my body's reaction underneath my thin shirt. Why? I should kick, run, fight.

Only the threat to my family keeps my feet planted on the carpet.

His pull is magnetic, holding me near him with an invisible force. He is old, rich, and intoxicating—my polar opposite.

I can't not stare up at him.

He leans down, his mouth close to mine. Is he going to kiss me? That crosses a serious line.

I'd have to respect myself enough to choose my earlier defenses of stomping on his foot or giving a knee to the groin.

What is he doing?

His lips are on mine.

My world slowly expands and shrinks at once.

The kiss is like nothing I've ever felt.

His body is 'robuste,' as we say in French. A man, not a boy. Why am I letting him kiss me? Now, as he holds me, one hand strokes my hair, running down my back, and the other still cups my face, his thumb brushing over my chin. My knee should indeed be rising to his groin and ending this.

Instead, my knees grow weak as I let the kiss deepen.

There's no messiness to it. He has a clean mouth, and his straight, white teeth don't bump into mine with teen awkwardness.

He French-kisses with *précision*, giving me a newfound respect for Madame Rossi's weekly language assignment. His tongue caresses mine as he presses his sturdy body against me. The word *immense* comes to mind as I feel his cock pressed against my belly—it feels enormous and ready.

It's way bigger than Carter's felt when he rubbed it against me.

What would it feel like to have this man, to have his immense cock inside of my virgin body? Wetness pools between my legs, my muscles clenching to stop it, but that only makes me more wanton.

I feel empty inside, needy. His firm erection makes me crave something to fill me, to build friction, to rub away this deep need inside me. The thought of having him inside me almost breaks my wee virgin brain. I haven't even let Carter inside me.

How did I let the sick thought of this stranger robbing me of my virginity after threatening to hurt my family into my brain?

We're still kissing; his thumb drags along my chin, then slips between my lips. His mouth leaves me so his eyes can find mine. A wicked grin curls at the corners of his perfect lips as he slides his thumb against my tongue.

Salty and warm. I wrap my lips around it and suck. This surprises him, and I see a look in the same vein as respect flashes through his eyes. He's pleased with me, with my sexual obedience. He thinks he has me in the palm of his hand.

And for a moment, with that perfect kiss, he almost did.

I sink my teeth into his flesh.

He gives a clipped groan of pain, withdrawing his thumb. The satisfaction I feel instantly turns to regret. He grabs me around the waist, strong arms locking around me, dragging me over to the bed.

Panic fills me.

The heat of retribution comes off him.

What's he going to do to me?

"Stop! Let me go!" I push at his hands, trying to free myself. I can't even move them an inch. He sinks onto the bed, spreading his long thighs. He flips me over his lap. Kicking one leg over mine, he locks me into place. I wriggle against him, trying to get loose, but it's no use. His arm is like a vice around my waist. My hair falls over my face.

"What are you doing?" I scream.

"Punishing you. Teaching you who rules your world now. Disrespect will not be tolerated." His tone is calm but laced with threat.

His hand slides under the loose waistband of my pajamas, and his palm feels rough against my skin. He grabs my naked ass, kneading and squeezing. He digs his fingertips into the curve of my butt cheek where it meets the top of my thigh.

"Mine," he says. "Every inch of you will belong to me. I'll enjoy owning every bit of you."

“Belong? Own?” I snap back.

His archaic words give me the anger I need to fight. My legs and torso may be imprisoned, but my arms remain free. With my upper body resting on my bed, I ball my hands into fists, reach behind me, and begin punching him and yelling, “I’m not going to marry you! Let me go!”

My hand swipes at his side. His hand leaves my ass, slipping out of my pants. He grabs both my wrists easily in the circle of his thumb and fingers. My shirt has ridden up in my struggles. He pins my hands to my bare lower back.

God, this man is strong.

“Since I have to keep your naughty hands in place, I can’t pull down your pants to spank your ass.”

Heat flashes over my face. I’ve heard him wrong.

I stutter out what he’s just told me. “S-s-spank me?”

“Yes.” I can practically feel his eyes looking me over, and then he says, his words menacing, “I want your clothes off. Now.”

I feel faint. My voice is barely a squeak. “And if I don’t?”

“I take off my belt.”

Ice creeps through my veins, and my limbs freeze. I do not want that to happen.

I think of him standing in the doorway when he first burst into my bedroom—the thick, black leather belt around his waist. I’ve never, ever been spanked. His hand is

strong, digging into my wrists. I can't imagine how much that would hurt. He's not one to bluff, and I can't handle a leather belt.

I have to remove my clothes with his dark eyes watching my every movement, and then I have to stand in front of this man, fully naked, my entire body exposed, bared, and trembling. The thought of this is frightening.

The belt is even more terrifying.

He kicks his leg out from around mine. "Are you ready to do as you're told?" he asks.

With his weight gone from me, I momentarily think of running. I'm clumsy; I'd trip over my two feet, and he'd catch me.

A shiver tears through me, imagining what could be worse than his belt.

Pushing the balls of my feet into the carpet, I clench my teeth. "Fine."

"I think you meant to say 'Yes, sir.'"

I can hear the pleasure in his voice. Why do I get the feeling this man is going to enjoy making me feel shame? I should fight him.

But the belt.

I force myself to utter the humiliating phrase of surrender. "Yes, sir."

"There's a good girl."

I moan at his dastardly pet name.

He lets me up.

I stand before him, my face hot with shame, my stomach knotted with anxiety. His face is stern, like what I imagine a father's would be. Did I really just think that? What is wrong with me?

Gross, Ophelia. Now is NOT the time for your daddy issues to come out and play.

I look away.

Clasping my hands before me, I shift my weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Um..."

"Look at me." His eyes cut to mine, demanding obedience. "Do as I say."

"Now?" I ask.

He nods. "Right now."

I close my eyes, blocking him out of my vision, but I can still feel him watching me as I grab the hem of my shirt. Cool air rushes over my naked skin as I pull the shirt over my head. I hold the clothing in front of my breasts, attempting to hide them, but my nipples tighten under his stare, betraying me.

His hand brushes against mine, making my eyes snap open. Gently, he takes the shirt from my hand, leaving me fully topless.

"Now, the pants," he demands.

The bottoms are even more challenging to lose. My fingers tremble under his heated stare as I grip the waistband. I tug them down over my hips, letting them slide to my

ankles, and step out of them. Now fully naked, cold night air caresses my skin, goosebumps rising, and my nipples grow even harder under his studious gaze.

I want to hide my body with my hands, but as I go to, he's pulling me over his lap with a growl, and I'm back in that humiliating position, only now naked with the feel of his clothing, the heat of his figure, against my exposed skin. My upper body rests on the bed. He leaves my arms free.

"Such a beautiful form. I've never seen anything so exquisite in my life."

My stomach flutters at his compliments. I'm not beautiful—far from it. But now, he's stroking me with his confident, rough fingers.

"You're gorgeous." His voice grows low and husky while observing my bare form over his parted thighs. "Gorgeous."

Holding back a moan, I grab the quilt, pulling it loose from the corner I securely tucked it into this morning. I'm so exposed and need the comfort of something familiar as I grip the soft cotton between my fingers.

And wait for my punishment.

Page 4

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CHAPTER 4

Haze

I've crossed many lines I didn't think possible, but I never thought I'd be robbing the cradle. I've left that to the other brothers and players, looking to have my needs met by women my age.

The truth is—I'm a liar. And a terrible one at that. I didn't take Ophelia because it was the best way to get my revenge against her mother, Leah. I took Ophelia because one day, when I was driving by their apartment and checking out the place where my nemesis lives, I saw her.

She was standing there on the corner of the street, throwing away a bag of trash, of all things. Her hair was tied back from her makeup-free face. She wore an apron and long, blue cleaning gloves. She tossed the trash in the can and closed the lid. Then, she carefully peeled off the gloves, stowing them in the pocket of her apron—like a woman much older than eighteen—before marching back into her place.

She was beautiful, stunning, and breathtaking in her bare-bones beauty. True. But there was something more, something deeper that made me want her in a way I've not wanted anything before.

Now, this sweet, young girl is lying over my lap, her body warm and soft against me, and all those other women are forgotten. She's mine. All mine. I cup her ass, holding her perfect curve in my grasp. I want to see my handprints on her porcelain skin.

I spank her, a smack focused on the center of one cheek. She gives me a gasp and moans. I spank her again, hearing the satisfying sound once more. I'm rewarded with yet another moan and two rosy handprints rising on her ass.

She squirms against me, her body rubbing my already rousing cock. Knowing she can feel how much she turns me on makes more blood pulse through my throbbing cock.

"Your skin turns such a pretty shade when I punish you." I spank her again on the other cheek, then add two more hard smacks in quick succession. She groans in pain—the spans sharp and stinging against her naked skin.

I want to feel more of her. I rest my hand on her ass, taking in the heat from her skin. "I want to feel how turned on you get from being punished," I say, my fingers creeping between her parted thighs. "I want to know how wet I make you."

Her body tenses, and she grips the blanket, trying to look at me over her shoulder. "Don't you dare touch me there!"

"I told you: you belong to me now. I can touch you anywhere I want to." I push between her ass cheeks, my fingers inching their way to her entrance, feeling the heat and slickness there. God, she feels so good. Turned on by how aroused I've made her, a deep moan rises from the back of my throat. "You're so wet for me."

She moans in shame.

I circle her clit with my fingertip that she coated while teasing her with my words. "I love how quickly your body responds to me. I love how hard your nipples got from being made to strip in front of me. I love how wet you are from being laid over my lap and punished like a naughty little girl."

"Stop. Please," she begs, her hips writhing, greedy for more.

I hold my pressed-together fingertips at the brink of her tight entrance. “You want my fingers inside of you, pretty girl?”

“No...” She pressed down against my fingers, wanting me inside her. “I don’t want you anywhere near me!”

“Your body betrays you.” I push my fingers past her tight opening, filling her. Her muscles squeeze around me. I stroke her slick, velvety walls. Her pussy tightens around my fingers—heat and wetness—as she whimpers with pleasure.

She bucks against my lap. She’s greedy—hungry for more. I read her body and follow her lead, touching her the way she wants, the way she craves, till she’s riding on the cusp, so close to the sweet relief of release.

I stop.

My fingers remain inside her, unmoving.

A moment of quiet fills the room, both of us still. Finally, she peers over her shoulder, panting. “Why—why did you stop?”

“You said you don’t want me anywhere near you,” I grin. Torturing her is so much fun. “Have you changed your mind?”

“Ugh...yes...I mean, no! Never!” She tries to remain still so that she’s not giving in to me, moving against me to take the friction her body so desperately needs. Despite her best efforts to resist me, her pussy tightens around my still fingers.

“Why can’t you ask me for what you want?” I give her one single stroke. She moans in desperation. “And don’t forget to say ‘sir.’”

“No.” She gives a weak whimper.

“So stubborn. Maybe a spanking will change your mind.” She tenses as I slip my fingers from her. I give her ass a few hard smacks. “Greedy girl. Ask me for what you want.”

“Please,” she whimpers, her hips twisting. “Touch me.”

I spank her ass again. “You’re forgetting something.” My fingers sneak back to her pussy, circling her swollen clit.

“S... SIR,” she cries, moving against me. “Please. Touch me, sir.”

“Good girl. Now, you may come.” I stroke her ass, enjoying her skin, warm and pink from my hand. “But not like this.”

Lifting her hips, I move out from under her, turning her naked body over onto her back so she’s lying on the bed. Her long hair splays out around her, almost as black and shiny as waves of dark water. Her cheeks are flushed, pink blooming against porcelain skin, her lips red. The three strands of pearls lay woven around her neck.

She looks like an angel.

Slipping my hands under the backs of her thighs, I part her legs. Kneeling on the floor in front of her, I drag her to the edge of the bed. “I want to taste you.”

She pops up on her elbows, eyes wide with anxiety. “No. I don’t like that stuff.” Vehemently, she shakes her head.

I smooth my hands over her legs as I stare up at her, a cocky grin spreading over my face. “You’ll love it when I do it.”

“I don’t think so...”

“It feels so nice—my wet, hot tongue tasting your pretty pussy. Look how wet you already are for me.” I stare at her parted thighs—her glistening, swollen folds. Shame reddens her face as she tries to push her legs together. Digging my fingertips into her skin, I hold them apart. “Don’t hide from me, pretty girl.”

She’s so desperate to come that she throws an arm over her eyes, falling back on the bed with a dramatic, “Oh, god...”

Diving between the tops of her thighs, I find her clit, circling it with the tip of my tongue until she’s rocking her hips opposite my fingers, moaning with pleasure. So quickly, she finds her way back to the crest of that wave.

She runs her fingers through my hair, the sensation sending tingles over the back of my neck. Her gentle touch runs through me. It feels good to have her fingers on me—too good.

I tongue her entrance, tasting her sweet musk. I find her scent, her taste, her moans intoxicating. I find her inebriating. I feel lightheaded and loose, my shoulder muscles relaxing as heat rushes through my core. A tight tension builds below my waist.

I feel so in tune with her body—knowing exactly what she needs and how to give it to her. I curl my fingers around her hips, dragging her even closer. She rises, curling around my body, fingers tightening around the locks of my hair as I bring her to the brink.

She cries out with little shrieks as she comes. She’s repeating, “Oh, wow! Oh, geez!” My laughter rumbles against her as I continue to kiss and lick, teasing another orgasm from her quaking body.

She's panting, gasping for air. "I... I can't. I can't take any more. Oh, god. I can't." Her hands leave my hair, pushing at me, attempting to be rid of me.

A time will come when she's pushing me away, and I won't stop.

She's young and new to this life, so I let her go. I stand, remaining at the edge of the bed as I gaze down at her beautiful body. Her gaze is soft and passive as she stares up at me.

The look doesn't last long.

Grabbing the quilt out from under her, she wraps herself in it, hiding her nudity as she shimmies back onto the bed, pressing herself against the headboard. Her fingers move to the strands of pearls that hang around her neck. Anxiously, she fiddles with them.

I slowly loosen my tie, undoing the satin from around my neck. Taking the wide end of my tie, I wipe my mouth clean, fold it neatly, and slide the material into my pocket. She watches me as she works to catch her breath.

I crawl across the bed to her. Releasing the pearls, she clutches the covers closer to her body. I reach out, brushing her hair back from her face. I lean closer and kiss her. Clutching the quilt to her body, she doesn't pull away, and she doesn't kiss me back.

I run my tongue over hers, making her taste her own arousal for what I assume will be the first time. I pull away, but only enough to whisper, "Still don't like that stuff?"

"Maybe I was wrong." She goes to pull away.

I grab her face, pull her in gently, and kiss her again. It takes my tongue to convince her, but she kisses me back this time. She responds further, reaching up to run her hands over the back of my hair.

It feels too good. I pull back, turning away from her. I stand, straighten my clothing, and run a hand through my hair.

“Get dressed,” I say. “We need to leave.”

She shoots up into a sitting position. “When?”

“Be ready in ten minutes.” Without looking back, I leave her to dress.

The bathroom is small, but spotless. I splash some cool water on my face, patting it dry with a clean towel, then wash and dry my hands. I glance up at the oval mirror that hangs above the sink.

I arrived from New York as twenty-five-year-old Harrison Bachman, a lethal young man with a babyface and a dimple to go with my curls. Already fighting my curls, I couldn’t have a childish name like Harry. Needing to establish myself as a man and not a child, I quickly introduced myself in Italy with the nickname my father gave me: Haze.

When I played hockey, I moved so fast over the ice that my father said I was like a haze, causing confusion among the players on the other team. In the end, the name didn’t matter. Within a week, I’d proved myself to the Brotherhood here, and the Italian branch of the family accepted me as one of them.

I stare back at my reflection. Now, ten years later, my face is all planes and angles. My dimple only shows when I belly laugh—which is rare. My dark hair is still thick, but there’s a threat of silver at my temples.

My lips are red, swollen from tasting her, and my hair stands on end from her fingers. The look in my eyes is... feral. Desperate. I’m a man addicted to a young girl who’s half my age.

Am I a monster?

When I return to the bedroom, she's dressed in jeans and a black sweater with no pearls. Curious. I wonder what she's done with them.

She wears white sneakers on her feet—probably ready to run.

Her long hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, and the hairstyle makes her look even younger. The girl is already barely legal. Guilt pricks at my conscience, but only for a moment.

I remind myself that I'm owed this. She is my retribution. My revenge.

I go to her small closet, surprised to find every item carefully stored in small plastic bins labeled with her perfect handwriting. I grab an empty duffle bag from a hook in the back of the closet and toss it onto her bed. "Pack your things. You're going home with me."

Her eyes travel to the water stain over her head. "This is my home."

I shake my head. "Not anymore."

"Home is where your family is," she argues. Jutting out a stubborn chin, she says, "Wherever you take me, I won't call it home."

"Stop talking and pack," I demand. "Now."

My words cause her to visibly tremble.

I step away from the closet, moving to the window to give her space to pack her things. She retrieves the bag, turning her back to me as she pulls open the small

dresser beside her bed. From the top of the dresser, she takes out neat stacks of underclothes, the teen wardrobe staple of hooded sweatshirts, and a soft cloth toiletry bag, putting it all in the bag.

She moves to the closet with the grace of a dancer. Eying the bins, she chooses a few items, crosses the room, puts them in the bag, and zips the top closed. She stands there, taking in the room for a moment. Then she stares down at the duffle and heaves a sigh.

Finally, she looks at me. "I'm ready."

"Where's your coat?" I ask. "It's late November."

She shrugs. "I never wear a coat."

"Get one," I say.

She eyes me. "You're not wearing one."

Lord, give me patience. Is this what fatherhood feels like? I raise one brow to the high heavens.

Returning to the closet, she grabs a dark green bomber-style jacket off the back of the closet door. She shrugs her arms into the sleeves and shoves her hands into her pockets.

Standing in the center of the room, she stares at me. "Happy?"

"Never," I say. "But at least you'll be warm." We're running out of time. Her family will be returning soon. "Let's get going."

She doesn't move. Instead, she stays firmly planted where she stands, interrogating me. "What about school? I still have a semester left 'till I graduate. And my job. I'm on the afternoon shift the rest of the week. They'll be expecting me."

"You're already set up to finish school online."

"That might not be so bad," she murmurs. "What about work?"

"My wife will only work if she wants, and it won't be at a fast-food chain. I'll take care of it."

She stares at the tops of her sneakers for a moment. Finally, she says, "You've made so many demands." She meets my eyes, her voice steadier now. "I have one for you."

Holding her gaze, I lower my tone. "You don't get to make demands."

CHAPTER 5

Haze

Are all teenagers this problematic? Does she not understand hierarchy?

She dares even to say the word “demand” to me...

I hold her gaze. “You don’t get to make demands.”

“Hear me out.” And she looks up at me with those big, blue eyes.

She’s too fucking cute for her own good. I want to spank her ass, but instead, I relent.

“Alright, but make it quick.”

“I’ll go with you,” she offers. “And I’ll make it easy for you. I won’t fight you.”

“And in exchange?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath, exhaling a string of words. “Tonight, my family comes home safe and sound. And your men will take Carter back to his house—alive and well. And leave him alone.”

“That’s two demands,” I say. “When you don’t get to make any. I’m taking you with me—fight or not.”

“It’s my family...” Her lip quivers, and it’s my undoing.

“Your family will be safe,” I tell her. “I can’t say that others who have attempted to steal from the Bachmans have been granted the same fate.”

“Okay. Good.” She exhales a shaky breath. “What about Carter?”

The boy I’d like to kill.

I slide a hand in my pants pocket. “I was looking forward to giving my men orders to rough him up after what he put you through.”

Her brows shoot up. “What did you hear?”

“I heard enough.” My fingers curl into a fist inside my pocket. “He’s lucky I’m letting him live.”

“Letting him live...” She repeats back my words, her eyes filling with fear as she accepts the kind of man I am.

“I will let him live,” I say. “For now. If he lays one finger on you again?—”

Not wanting to hear more, she cuts me off. “Okay, I get it. I’ll do as you say for tonight.”

“And after that?” I ask.

A sudden surge of bravery takes over. “We’ll see how I feel.” She lifts the duffle bag strap to hang it over her shoulder.

“If you want to risk it.” I take the bag’s strap from her hands before it touches her shoulder, pulling it over my own. I smooth my hand over her denim-covered curves, pulling her tight against me. Our bodies press against one another, my heat

transferring with hers. “It’s your ass on the line.”

She blushes, knowing I’m speaking literally. Pulling away from my grasp, she leans down, reaching for a backpack on the floor. I grab the bag before she can lift it and toss it over my other shoulder.

Nodding at the bed, I say, “Get your quilt. You’ll want something from home.”

She goes to argue. “I don’t want to take anything else?—”

“Our deal?” I say.

“Fine.” She grabs the rumpled quilt from the bed, adding a pillow for good measure.

I reach out to take them. “I’ll carry those for you.”

“I’ve got it. I can carry them myself.” She starts to brush by me.

I gently grab her elbow, giving her a soft squeeze in reminder. “Ophelia.”

She hands me the bedding without another word.

She’s learning quickly. Kind of.

We leave the apartment, stepping out into the crisp night. I’m hoping for a moment of peace, but even the two flights of stairs don’t slow her down. She has more questions—too many—and she asks them freely.

“Why were they invited to the Villa in the first place?” She peeks over her shoulder at me. “Do they know about our arrangement?”

I shift the strap of the duffle higher up on my shoulder. How much should I tell her? I decide to give her the basic outline.

“Last night, your family received a call inviting them to the Villa tonight for a big announcement about your education,” I explain.

“Ah,” she says, turning the corner to descend the next flight of stairs. “My mom mentioned something about the invitation and dinner this morning when I was clearing up breakfast.”

“Tonight, over Wagyu steaks and wine, Emilia is charming them, and Liam is telling them that you’ve won a Bachman-sponsored scholarship for international travel and that you’ll be studying abroad next semester.”

She piles on the questions. “Wouldn’t I have been at the dinner too? Don’t they expect me to be home when they return? They’ll wonder where I am.”

“The Bachman Foundation for Higher Education does exist, and each year chooses a student to sponsor to study abroad. We’d never pick one from a school as affluent as yours.” Weighed down by the bags, she’s getting ahead of me. I don’t want her more than an arm’s reach away. “Slow down.”

She eases her stride. “So why wouldn’t I have been invited to this fancy dinner?”

“Parents are brought to a dinner whenever a gift is announced, and a professional film crew surprises the student alone in their home. They pack their bag, then they’re immediately whisked away,” I explain.

“Thank goodness you didn’t bring a film crew. Would have been X-rated,” she quips.

We reach the exit door and step outside. She takes a few focused breaths as I struggle

to catch mine.

Stalling with sneakers planted on the sidewalk, she peers up at me. “What about the money my mom owes you? Didn’t you say you were going to punish her? Make her pay? Are you ever going to tell her you’ve kidnapped me for payment?”

“I will when the time is right,” I admit.

She throws her hands on her hips, eyeing me. “Making sure I’m marriage material first?”

Liam wanted it this way—not me. I would have rather broken down the door and ripped Ophelia from Leah’s arms for what she did to me. I have no idea why he asked me to take this slow.

It wasn’t my choice, but I need the air of control, so I say, “I’m biding my time.”

“You’ll have to tell my grandma the truth.” She shakes her head. “I feel sorry for you when that time comes. You’ll need your full security on board.”

“Let’s focus on the present,” I say, ready to be in the car.

She’s eyeing the door to the stairs behind her. She’s stalling, trying to find an escape route, she asks, “Why me, though?”

“Don’t even think of running,” I say. “I may be out of breath from those stairs, but I promise—I will catch you.”

“I wasn’t thinking of running,” she lies. “I just want to ask a few questions before I hop in a stranger’s car.”

“Like what?” I snap.

She shrugs, lifting her brows in an attempt to look innocent. “Tons of people have crossed the Bachman family, I’m sure. Couldn’t you choose from one of them? I mean—you all are millionaires, for goodness’ sake. There’s got to be some gold diggers out there eyeing you guys.” She takes a step away from me.

“Billionaires, actually,” I correct her, stepping forward and closing the gap between us.

Taking another step back, she says, “I’m sure there are women falling over themselves to marry a Bachman billionaire. You know—it’s not too late. You all could send me on a little trip, and at the end of the semester, I magically pop back up. What my mom did wasn’t that bad.”

Not that bad?

I step closer.

Heat and rage boil inside me. I tell myself to calm down—she’s young and naïve. She has no idea about these things.

What her mother did to me...

She stole from me. She disrespected me. She made me the laughingstock of the Brotherhood for a time, having gotten swindled by an online dating profile.

Those things—I could forgive.

Leah took something away from me that she should never have given me. Hope. And for that, she will pay.

It would have been her had I not driven by and seen Ophelia that day and wanted her so badly. I don't know why Liam asked me to wait to tell Ophelia's family the truth about our arrangement, but he did. And so, I will.

For a moment, she debates, hovering where she stands. I watch closely, ready to drop everything and take off after her. She bites her bottom lip, looks at the stairs, then back at my face.

I move in, leaving no room between us as I stare down at her. "You really don't want to run. It won't be pleasant for you when I catch you."

Whatever she sees in my eyes makes her shake her head and say, "I told you—I'm not running."

We walk to the street side-by-side in silence.

My driver, Nico, is waiting for us beside the black Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio. He's young and eager, hoping to move up in the ranks with his broad, white grin and boulder-like build. He loves this car. He opens the door with a smile that he's had pasted on his face since he first got behind the wheel.

Handing the bags and bedding to Nico, I guide Ophelia into the back. I didn't choose this car only because it's Nico's favorite—it has a roomy back seat that we might need.

Depending on how she chooses to behave.

A smoky privacy screen is already in place, making the vehicle's cab wholly soundproof and secluded from the driver and the rest of the world.

The moment we're inside the warm cab, she shrugs out of her coat, placing it on the

seat between us like a barrier. I observe, ensuring she buckles her safety belt while thinking of my reckless teen days. Once we're settled, I press a button, letting Nico know we're ready. Smoothly, the Alfa pulls away from the curb.

"What's that for?" She points at the privacy screen. "So you can murder people back here?" Her leg shakes, her knee bouncing up and down as she waits for an answer.

"Stop." I place a hand over her knee to still her. "You're going to shake us off the road."

"Sorry." She throws me a glance. "I'm nervous."

"Why?" I ask.

"Seriously?" She stares back at me. "The whole 'kidnapping-arranged-marriage thing?'"

"Oh—that." I'm perfectly content with our arrangement. I'd forgotten she's not. "Right. The screen is not for murders. It's for our privacy. The side windows are tinted, as well. No one can see in, but you can see out."

They're also bulletproof. Seeing as she's just asked me if we murder people in this car, I think it's best not to mention bullets.

"The tint is extremely dark." She squints into the night. "Why do you need windows that no one can see into if you're not murdering people back here?—"

I slide a hand from her knee and up her thigh, squeezing, cutting off her words. "People like to do other things in private, you know."

Pushing my hand away, she resumes bouncing her knee. "When I'm nervous, I either

freeze up or talk incessantly.”

“Incessantly and fast,” I murmur back. “I’m getting the idea this is one of those nervous, talking times.”

“Maybe,” she shrugs, looking out her window. “At least I can see out of this window. Kind of.” Her voice is low. “You seem to know everything about me. I don’t even know your name.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that I didn’t tell her.

“Harrison—” And almost say “Harden,” my last name from another lifetime that I haven’t spoken in a decade. Harrison Harden no longer exists. “Bachman. Harrison Bachman. But I go by Haze.”

“Harrison.” She looks at me then, a smirk curling on her pretty lips. “You go by Haze because you don’t want people calling you Harry?”

“No,” I lie.

“I think it is,” she says, eyeing me closer. “I think you go by Haze because you don’t want people calling you Harry—like Prince Harry. You know, Harrison can be shortened to other things. Hank. Harris. Sonny—oh, what about that one for you?”

She chats when she’s anxious, so I appease her. “Sonny?”

“Sonny,” she says. “Sonny to suit your sunny disposition.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“How about ‘Little Ray of Sunshine?’” She grins. “Sunny Sunshine Man?”

Inwardly, I groan. “Stop.”

Enjoying how uncomfortable her game makes me, she waggles her brows. “Sunny Bunny? Honey the Sunny Bunny?”

Referring to me having a cotton tail is my hard limit.

“Enough.” I bend toward her, whispering in her ear. “Unless you want to give the driver a show and end up back over my lap.”

She shifts away from me, finding a safer place by the car door. Changing the subject, she says, “I like Haze. Where did that come from?”

“My father.” Mentioning him shoots a pain through my chest.

“Is he a Bachman, too?” she asks.

I don’t need to tell her that my father’s dead, let alone about my estranged mother killing him. My harsh tone attempts to end the topic. “No, he’s not a Bachman.”

Staring out the window, she murmurs to herself. “I don’t know much about my dad.” Suddenly, deep in thought, she goes quiet. She must be shifting into her quiet nervous phase.

Her silence allows my mind to wander, and I wonder what she does know about her father. Did he give Ophelia’s mother the pearl necklace that’s now absent from her neck? Is that why she never takes it off—is it a connection to him?

What I know about her father is minimal. His name was Tartan Erwin. He was involved in the King’s Mafia in Scotland. A rival gang member shot him. Ophelia had been in his arms only moments before the murder.

Her mother and grandparents moved with her to Italy soon after.

If I didn't have to marry to move up in the Brotherhood, I'd never take a woman home to the Villa. For sure, I wouldn't be sharing a car with a girl still in school. Our paths would never have crossed if it weren't for her mother's mistakes.

Was it fate that brought us together?

Some would say there are no coincidences. They would argue that there was an underlying reason I felt the need to go to Emilia's that particular day and set up the online dating profile. That fate guided my hand, making me click on the fake picture Leah had posted to her profile, forcing me to write back and forth, flirting. Even—I cringe—allowing me to let my guard down enough to set up a meeting with her.

Far from the Villa, putting myself in a vulnerable position.

I don't believe in fate. I was foolish. I took the bait.

I think of that day in the park. Even a hardened bachelor like me could agree it was a romantic spot for a first date. I waited anxiously for Leah, barely able to believe I'd finally connected with someone—online, no less.

I stood there, the sun warming my face, the tall grasses blowing in the breeze, my chest filled with something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Meeting Leah online, all those chats, the flirty emails, the provocative pictures I'd later find after tracing the IP address, weren't even her; they gave me the illusion that someone like me—bitter and ruined by his past— could have a real marriage.

Leah forced the most dangerous thing onto me.

Hope.

She made me think I could love someone.

Then, she stole it away.

I stood there, even when she was fifteen minutes late. Twenty. Even when she was thirty minutes late, I hadn't given up. She'd asked me to leave my phone in the car so we could have a simple date. Just us and the moor.

I needed to return to the car park and get my phone. There would be a message from her or a missed call explaining her delay. Instead, an elderly couple appeared from the trees, wandering off the path.

They approached me before I could reach the car park, asking me for directions. The woman, clutching the arm of the man, stumbled as they made their way back to the path. I rushed over to help, kneeling down and wrapping my arms around her to steady her.

There were no missed calls or texts when I got to my phone. I tried to send a message on the dating app but was blocked. I drove home in a daze. I couldn't believe Leah had stood me up without so much as a call or message.

I spent the evening drinking whiskey and scouring the app for any profile that resembled her, but she was just gone. I drank, grieving what I thought I'd lost in her.

It was morning before I realized my wallet was gone from my jacket.

It was a setup. The whole thing—the texts, the messages, the pictures—none of it was authentic. It was all a ploy to see if she could lure me to the middle of nowhere, using two elderly pawns to rob me.

Now, Ophelia and I will both pay the consequences.

‘Til death do us part.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

CHAPTER 6

Haze

Ophelia breaks her silence, turning to me. “Can you tell me about the Villa? I’d feel better knowing something about it before we arrive.”

“It’s a beautiful place to come home to,” I say.

“I told you, I won’t call that place home.” A tear slides down her cheek. Angry she’s shown weakness, she swipes it away.

“God, don’t cry.” My words sound harsher than I meant. I’m already affectionate for her; the last thing I need is to see tears fall from her blue eyes.

“I’m not crying,” she snaps. “I don’t cry.”

“Okay.”

I have no idea what to say to a crying teenage girl who says she’s not crying. I try to come up with something, but it’s a wasted effort because she’s now sliding back into her nervous-talking phase.

“It’s not like I shouldn’t be crying if I were, which I wasn’t. If I did cry, I would think you’d be able to understand why. This whole thing—it’s... crazy!” Overwhelmed, she shakes her head.

I attempt to swallow back my soft feelings towards her. “Here. Put this on.” Lifting her coat from the seat, I lay it on her lap to calm her.

She pulls her jacket up to her chin, covering her chest like a blanket. “Breaking into my house... how did you even get inside?”

“Thank God I came into your room when I did,” I retort. “Who knows what could have happened with that shithead.”

She side-eyes me. “What you did wasn’t much better.”

“You begged me to keep going.” I want her to stop crying, so I give her a cocky grin.

The face I pull gets results. She rests her head against the headrest, throwing her hands in the air. “Gah! You’re insufferable.”

I’ll gladly take her anger over her sadness. “Do all teens use such big words?” I ask sarcastically.

She rolls her eyes. “Expensive school—large vocabulary.”

I don’t want to see another tear. I try to appease her, thinking of the benefits of our arrangement. “You’ll have everything you could ever want. All your needs will be met. You can study without having to work, and you can even graduate early if you like.”

“All in exchange for becoming your child bride.” She eyes me. “Should I also wear long braids and a dress down to my ankles?”

“No. You’ll wear Armani. Or Prada. Whatever designer you choose.” I stroke a finger over the satin fabric of the coat that covers her, tracing along the upper curve

of her breast. She sucks air in at my touch. “A gown made just for your body—the fabric, style, cut, all chosen to complement your beauty. Have you considered the upsides?”

Her hand swipes at mine, pushing me away from her. “Fate has played me a dastardly hand.”

Fate...

There’s that dirty four-letter f-word again.

Why does it keep coming up with this girl?

She goes quiet, and we stare out our respective windows. As we get closer to the lake, I question my decision to bring her here. I wanted my revenge, and I needed a bride. She’s a means to an end. I glance over at her, where she sits perfectly frozen, her beautiful face deep in thought.

She’s so young—teasing me about my name—yet seems like an old soul. An emotion deeper than lust stirs in me, reminding me of our kiss. I can’t deny the intensity of our connection, even though we have nothing in common.

Yet, there I was, driving by that day when she just happened to be taking out the trash, and seeing her made something shift in me.

Could it be fate that’s brought us together?

A bitter man with issues. A barely legal virgin. A forced marriage.

“You want to know about the Villa.” I distract both of us from our thoughts by returning to answer her question. “It started as one home—a white mansion on the

shore of the lake. The house was called the Villa. Now, there are more houses, built like the first to house Italy's family branch as it grows, but the name hasn't changed."

"And everyone there belongs to the mafia?" she asks.

"Mafia is a complicated word. You mean a member of the Bachmans. And yes. Well, no, not exactly," I explain. "We have staff on site who we call 'Bachman friendly.' They're our trusted allies, but not part of us. To become a Bachman, you join by marriage or initiation. When men are initiated, they legally change their last name to Bachman, leaving the old name behind with their past life."

"Isn't that incredibly difficult leaving everything behind?" she asks.

"For most of us, it's easier than you'd think. People attracted to the Bachmans tend to be missing something from their lives—searching for their chosen family." My voice drops as I admit this. "Although we tend not to realize that's what we're looking for until it happens."

Her words are warm. "That's... nice. I like that."

Clearing my throat, I move on, shocked that I opened up about something so intimate. Subject change. History lesson time. "The Brotherhood originated in New York in the early 1900s. The family would rob from the rich and redistribute the wealth among the people."

"Like Robin Hood." She sniffs. "I would loooove to see you in tights."

"Stop," I warn.

She chokes back her laugh. "Are you sure 'redistribute' isn't a word you use to feel better about your crimes?"

“Maybe.” I shrug. “Anyway, that was a long time ago. Now, we mainly make our billions by investing our millions.”

“Investing the money you stole,” she corrects, “to make more money.”

“It’s not that simple,” I say.

“Dastardly,” she says.

I balk. “We have plenty of programs to help the less fortunate.”

“Like the Bachman Education Fund you use to buy students for wives?” she quips.

Ignoring her dig, I answer, “The Higher Education Fund. Yes. Exactly.”

She narrows her gaze, her brain constantly on the move. “But you have enemies like the mafia, right?”

I drum my fingers on the seat beside me. How much do I tell her? Eventually, she’ll need to know everything the other wives know, but she’s already going through nervous spells. Tonight is too soon to explain that we don’t always play well with others.

“It’s nothing you have to worry about. Especially if you follow our rules?—”

The screeching of tires from another vehicle on the road cuts off my words. This road is always quiet this late at night, and the sound makes the hair on my neck stand up. With the privacy screen in place, I can’t see the road.

“What was that?” She stares out her window.

“Maybe someone swerved to avoid hitting a deer,” I offer, knowing it’s unlikely. “Hold on. Let me find out.”

I reach for the call button but miss as the car pulls to a harsh halt. The momentum sends us flying forward against our safety belts, then snapping back. The backs of our heads hit the headrests. The car finally comes to a complete stop. I shake off the rattle, and my only thought is her wellness.

I reach for her. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Yes. I mean, no.” She shakes her head. “I’m not hurt. I’m fine.” Our abrupt stop shakes her, but she holds her composure.

I push the button, calling out to Nico over the intercom system. “What the hell was that?”

A woman’s shrill voice with a thick Italian accent comes over the speaker, along with Nico’s calm demeanor. “Signora, please step away from the vehicle,” he speaks out.

Her voice is closer and more unmistakable now as she shrieks at Nico. “Tell him I’m here. Right. NOW!”

Ice creeps through my veins. I snap my finger away from the button. “God dammit.” Rage bubbles inside me. I can’t believe she’s doing this kind of thing. Again. Liam told me I needed to have eyes on her, but I didn’t think it had gotten this out of control.

“Who was that with your driver?” She looks from me, back out the window, then back to me. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.” I unsnap my safety belt and grab the door handle, locking gazes

with her. “Stay here. Do not move.”

“Okay—” Her breaths come quickly, clearly rattled.

I grab her hand. “Promise me you’ll stay here.”

“I will.” She nods.

I squeeze her hand warningly, or maybe it’s offering comfort; I’m not sure.

“Stay here!” I fly from the car, closing the door behind me with Ophelia safely inside. I run to the front of the vehicle to help Nico. He’s standing at the hood of the Alfa, the driver’s door flung open. He’s not yet pulled his gun, but his hand is on his hip, ready.

She stands there in the headlights, the shiny, red Porsche Macan I bought her parked skewed over the center lines of the road. A string of curse words in Italian streams from her red lips as she runs her hands up and down the sides of her pale, gray wool coat. “Where is HEEEEEEE!”

Fuck. Bianca—my ex.

The woman who made me swear off all romantic relationships that lasted longer than the afterglow of sex.

“Bianca.” My booming voice snaps her out of her piercing shriek. “What do you want?”

“Harrison! There you are.” At the sight of my face, hers falls into a crumpled mess. Huge sobs rack her body as she wails. “Why won’t you answer any of my calls?”

She runs to me, but Nico flings his tree trunk of an arm straight out, wrapping it around her waist and stopping her. “Niiiiicooooo! Please! Let me see him.” She digs her chipped red fingernails into his forearm, which luckily is protected by his black leather jacket.

“What the hell are you doing? You could have caused an accident. How did you know I was on this road anyway?” A chill creeps up my spine. “Have you been following me again?”

“What choice do I have? Amore mio ? My love—” she cries out.

“Do not call me your love,” I warn.

“Harrison. Come here.” She reaches out for me.

I’ve heard she tried to buy a gun recently. We stopped her. Still, I don’t want to take chances. I scan her hands for a weapon. Thankfully, they’re empty.

An animal-like howl rises from her. “How can you say that? After all we’ve been through? And the baby—our precious baby.”

Not this again. A groan rumbles so deep through me that I feel it in my toes. Yanking my hand through my hair, I clench my jaw. There’s no civil response to what she’s just said.

A new, younger voice joins the conversation from behind me. “Baby? What baby? Who is this woman?”

Ophelia.

“Tell me that is NOT your voice that I hear, Ophelia.” Fuck. I shouldn’t have used

her name in front of Bianca. I want to turn and face Ophelia, but I can't. I keep my gaze trained on Bianca, ensuring she doesn't make any sudden moves.

"I came out to see what was taking so long," Ophelia replies in a sheepish tone.

"Who is that, amore mio ? What's that girl doing with you?" Bianca peers past me, lunging against Nico as he plants his boots into the concrete, grunting as he holds her back.

"No one, Bianca," I say. "Just?—"

"No one?" Ophelia sniffs.

Bianca isn't only unhinged—she's dangerous. Think fast, Haze. Keep her safe .

I gesture behind me. "This is Liam's little cousin we're bringing back from the airport." I take my eyes off Bianca only long enough to turn my head over my shoulder and stare daggers at Ophelia as I shout, "Get your ass back in the car. NOW!"

"Fine. Fine." Ophelia puts her hands up in surrender. "I'm going."

I watch Ophelia until she's back in the car with the door closed.

"Boss," Nico says, getting my attention. His hand slides toward the pocket of his trousers. "I hate to use it, but I don't think we have another choice."

Seeing no alternative, I nod in agreement. "There is no other choice."

"What do you mean?" Bianca's head snaps frantically from Nico to me. "What are you talking about? No other choice than what?" Her eyes widen, and a feral look

drops over her face. “You’re going to kill me?”

One arm still firmly around her, Nico pops the cap off a syringe and has it firmly planted in her buttocks before I can reach him to help.

“Merda ! That freaking stings. What the hell? What have you done?” She swings her head back to see what’s been stuck in her ass. The meds hit her as she turns. Suddenly, she sways, unsteady on her feet. “Oh... oh...”

I watch with relief as Bianca slumps into Nico’s waiting arms. “That was fast.”

“Course it was.” Nico braces himself, pulling her up. “A full dose of Dr. Bruno’s magic potion on a woman that can’t weigh more than a few sacks of flour. Plus, she doesn’t eat. Remember?”

I’d forgotten about Bianca’s signature diet of red wine and licorice. This should have been a red flag sooner in the relationship, but it became a source of contention on nights out. I love to eat.

Moving quickly, I check to see that Ophelia’s door is still shut, then cross the road to where he stands. “Let me help you get her to the car.”

I edge an arm under one of Bianca’s, redistributing some of her weight from Nico to me. She may not weigh much, but when you’ve had a hefty dose of our serum, you go boneless, and your body becomes like a sack of stones.

Nico and I take her back to the Porsche and settle Bianca in the passenger seat. I pull the safety belt over her chest, click it into place, and close the door.

“I’ll have someone drive her home.” I pull out my phone and send the order for two men. One to drive Bianca and the Porsche back to her apartment. The other to follow

them in one of our cars. I type out a long-overdue message to Liam as well. Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I admit, “I think it’s time I finally took Liam’s advice and put a team of eyes on her.”

“ Si ! You’d best get eyes on Bianca 24/7,” Nico laughs. “Unless you want to find bunny rabbits boiling in pots on your stove.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“American movie reference,” Nico clarifies. “I swear, we Italians have seen them all. How have you not watched Fatal Attraction? Glenn Close is pure gold.”

“Boiled bunnies in pots?” I laugh. “Sounds like a five-star film. Luckily, I don’t have pets. We’ll wait in the Alfa ‘till someone comes to collect her.” I head back to our car as Nico pulls the Porsche off to the side of the road and parks it on the shoulder.

I open the back door of the Alfa, finding a very curious Ophelia peering up at me. Her blue eyes are wide, she’s clutching her olive jacket to her chest, and I can tell she’s ready to fire off her latest string of burning questions.

She doesn’t hesitate, and they come like missiles. “What was that all about?” she demands. “And who was that woman? Did she say something about a baby?”

“Can I at least sit down first?” I ask.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, scootching over. I slide in beside her, closing the door behind me.

“That,” I say, “was no one.”

“Oh. Great!” She sniffs. “A no one, just like me!”

I shake my head. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Simultaneously, she rolls her eyes and slumps back against the seat. “Is she also a cousin of Liam?”

Nico returns to our car to drive us home, pulling to the shoulder of the road. I glance down at her seat belt. “Buckle yourself up. And you don’t need to worry about her.”

She grabs her seat belt, tugging it over her and latching it. “She said she has your baby—and you’re trying to marry me. I think I deserve to know who she is.”

“You deserve to know what I share with you,” I say. “Now, sit tight and prepare to enjoy the rest of the ride in silence. Please.”

She mumbles back her final retort. “She almost snapped my neck with that car stunt she pulled, and I can’t even ask a few questions?”

At Ophelia’s mention of getting hurt, my entire body bristles. Bianca was only pulling a stunt, but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t have gone further than she meant. Ophelia could have been hurt. The idea makes me feel lightheaded, like I’m spinning out of control.

Retrieving my phone, I message the head of security, letting him know I want around-the-clock coverage of Bianca starting yesterday. With Bianca handled, I focus on the next task at hand.

For Ophelia’s safety and my sanity, she must obey every command or suffer the consequences.

I eye the black box stowed below the seat in front of me.

Inside is something I've hand-selected for her.

If she won't listen to me, I'll train her body to obey me.

"You've asked a lot of questions, Ophelia. I think it's time I asked one of my own."
Cupping her face, I lean in close enough to kiss her. Our eyes lock, and my voice drops two octaves. "Didn't I tell you to stay in the car?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

CHAPTER 7

Ophelia

With our eyes locked like this, something akin to trust passes between us. His hand is warm against my skin as he holds my face, guiding me achingly close to his expert mouth. His breath rustles my hair as he speaks with a rough, even tone.

Each word is clear and firm as he demands, “Didn’t I tell you to stay in the car?”

I’m getting wet when I should be getting angry. Speechless, I clear my throat, shift my weight, and pull away. “I’m not a child.”

“Yet somehow you’ve found yourself under the care of a daddy.” His hand drops.

Daddy.

Rational thoughts don’t come, and his statement leaves me wordless, wet, and squirming with shame. Shaking my head, finally, I stutter, “Th...that’s not... a thing.”

“Isn’t it?” He eyes me, studying every flicker of emotion on my face.

Hearing that taboo, weighted word fall from those sexy lips of his shifts something deep within me—something I can’t put words to, but I know what hearing that word makes me feel.

Blazing licks of fiery shame everywhere.

Daddy...

The word instantly dredges up my deep-seated desire for protection and care and childhood feelings of safety—which I assume came with the role of daddy's girl. Deeper still, the ultimate desire to submit to a man in control, one you trust.

Warm, fuzzy feelings of attachment lead to something hotter...

Power and dominance.

The idea of submitting to him in every way.

Luckily, Nico's voice comes over the speaker, cooling the volcano that's erupted within me and breaking the heated moment between us.

"Bianca is returning to her place," Nico says. "Ready to ride, sir?"

He pushes the button on the speaker to answer. "Yes. Thanks."

I glance over as Haze leans forward, sliding a shiny black metal box from underneath the car's front passenger seat. He brings the box to his lap and sticks his hand in his pocket, but it comes up empty.

"Where is that damn key?" he asks himself, pushing his hand in his other pocket. What is he doing now?

My heart lurches to my throat. I back further away from him, pressing against the car door. Only a moment ago, he was holding my face in his hand, staring deep into my eyes. Now, I'm wondering what is in this box that he keeps easily accessible, yet under lock and key. How quickly the delicate feeling of trust between us dissipates.

Could he have a gun? Was he only keeping me calm up until now? Teasing me, toying with me, playing me?

Dangling me like a cat toying with a little mouse until he could get me onto Bachman property.

Does he mean for me to pay this debt... with my life?

He was waiting for me to misstep, giving him a reason to punish me for the final time. He told me to stay in the car—I didn't. And now, he's brought out this box.

My thoughts do a one-eighty. I'm being silly, ridiculous even. It's not a gun. He won't hurt me.

"I must have dropped the key on the floor." He bends down, dragging his fingers over the mat and carpet before him.

What is in that case?

I take deep, steady breaths, trying to remain calm. He's busy searching and not paying attention to me. My hand creeps toward the car door. I'm getting out of here. I will run.

Three, two, one!

Bracing myself for the lunge, I yank the door handle.

Nothing happens.

Did you think the door would open, Ophelia? Would this pristine sedan with bulletproof-looking glass not have child locks? He did call himself "daddy" after all.

Sitting up straight, he turns to face me, brow knit tightly. “What are you doing?”

“What’s in the box?” I counter.

“I found the key.” That sexy, cocky smile spreads over his handsome face. How is it that I’m terrified the man is going to kill me, yet I’m getting all wet and slippery down there? “I was just going to show you.”

His deft fingers move swiftly, inserting a small silver key into the lock. He turns it with a click, and I brace myself. The latch pops open.

Staring at the box, I wait for him to lift the lid.

He begins to open it and then pauses, looking at me. “Wait—what did you think it was?” he asks.

I tell the truth. “A gun.”

“I’d never hurt you,” he says. “I told you that.”

I clear my throat. “How quickly you forget what you did to me earlier.”

“You mean...” He leans over me, his lips so close to my ear that my skin tickles as he speaks. “When I put you over my lap and spanked you like the naughty girl you are?”

I gulp, pulling away.

He stares at me, making me wetter just by running the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip as I watch. “I’ll punish you when you’re bad, but I’ll never hurt you. Not like that.”

I'm struggling to see the difference, but now isn't the time to ask for clarity.

Instead, I stare, breath trapped in my lungs. I exhale, breathing out, "What is in the box?"

"Let me show you." He lifts the lid so freaking slowly until—finally—the box is open.

I drift a little closer and stare at its contents.

Nestled in a silver velvet casing is a series of pink...things. Each replicating the previous one, but growing in size. Their shape reminds me of an upside-down IUD—like the one my mom dragged me to the clinic to have inserted when she found out about Carter. Or the shape of an anchor, with a curved handle at the bottom, coming up into a carrot-shaped point. They're hot pink and made of what looks like silicone.

The only thing my little virgin brain can imagine is, "Are they vibrators?"

"No," he smiles. "But they do vibrate." I stare at the case he holds before me, and he says, "Touch one."

"No, thank you." I shrink away, tucking my hands beneath my thighs and pressing my back to the door again.

He chuckles softly to himself.

There's a square button on his car door, and it's one I hadn't noticed before. He presses it now. I watch in amazement as the dark windows are further tinted with dark frost and dim lights come on from overhead, filling the car's cab with warm light.

It'd almost be a romantic space if I weren't trapped inside with a kidnapper and his toy box.

"I want your full attention." His voice is thick. "Now you can't even see out."

"And I can't get out either," I mutter back.

His plan failed because now, my full attention is not on him but on the pink elephants marching across the black, velvet-lined box.

What's he planning on doing with those?

A shiver tears through me, and my whole body tenses, knowing he wants to put those things inside me... and I remember my earlier promise not to fight him tonight.

I will break that promise if he brings any of those pink things anywhere near one of my orifices.

Finally, he speaks. "You haven't been keeping your promise to me."

"What gives you that idea?" I lie, keeping away from him. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"You are. But if the doors worked any other way, you'd have flown out of here. Also, after promising me you wouldn't, you got out of the car earlier. You need a reminder of who is in control here."

His words—giving off a sense of protection, assertiveness, and someone looking out for me—bring back that warm, wet feeling.

I deny it, push it away, sniffing my dislike. "Oh, I know who's been in charge since the caveman days," I breathe out. "The p-a-t-r-i-a-r-c-h-y. A society led by men."

“Are you having a spelling quiz by yourself? If you like games, you’ll love playing mine.” He points to the smallest toy in the case, angling it close for my inspection. “This goes in your ass, and you’ll wear it all night to remind you to obey me.”

My asshole tightens, and my butt cheeks clamp together. I stare at him blankly. I want to push his hand away, but I don’t. I scratch the words out of my bone-dry mouth...

“You’re not doing that to me! You must be joking,” I croak out.

“Do I seem like one to joke about power and control?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“You put yourself in danger.” His eyes lock on mine, cupping my face with his free hand as he does. “And I’ll never let you off easily when you do that.”

Power and control. Someone to look out for my safety. It’s what I’ve been craving, right? So, why am I now so terrified? He’s a man obsessed with sex and power; he knows what he’s doing.

He’s prepared to dominate, bringing along his box of toys. Even the smallest one seems immense. Swallowing hard, I eye them. “Why so many of them? And why do they get bigger?”

That sexy, wicked grin of his comes over his face. Is that a dimple on his cheek? Combined with his now wild curls that frame his face, I almost forget how dangerous he is.

His grin doubles. “They increase in size to train your ass to take my cock.”

Eyeing the largest one, my stomach churns.

“As your husband, I insist on burying my cock in every warm place I can.” He lifts the first object, the smallest one, from the box, holding it up.

“You think you’ll put that... thing... in there? I’ve never even had...” My words trail off, and I stare, imagining where the toy is meant to go, my virgin body shaking. I gather the nerve to finish the thought. “I’ve never even had... sex.”

“Don’t worry. We will. Lots .” He nods at my waist. “First—take off those jeans.”

“Take off my jeans?” Perform yet another submissive display to please him and humiliate me. “Here, in the car?”

He glances at the top of the back seat. “Then kneel on the seat facing the back.”

Meeting my eyes, he says, “And grab the headrest. You may need the anchor.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

CHAPTER 8

Ophelia

I think of the other things he's done to my body—the orgasm that tipped me over into oblivion. That thing in his hand was enormous. The place it is going into is tight. Do I need to hold something to keep me from rocketing to the moon?

The silver buckle of his belt glints against the dim overhead car light. That belt is the only thing that has my shaking fingers going to the button at my waist. I undo my jeans, lift my ass, sit back down—the leather smooth against my ass—and push the denim over my thighs. I let the material hang around my knees, wanting to leave them on somewhat.

He eyes the jeans. “All the way.”

Slipping off one sneaker, then the other, I push my jeans the rest of the way off. I'm left bare-legged, wearing my sweater and the most modest pair of boy-cut, short-style panties I could find, with white athletic socks on my feet.

I fold the jeans neatly, placing them on the seat beside me. I line up my shoes side-by-side on the floorboard, releasing a massive sigh. Am I really going to do this?

The look on his face tells me I am.

Slowly, I turn my body to face the back of the seat. My knees sink into the soft leather cushion. Gripping the headrest with both hands, I close my eyes.

“Such a good girl. Doing exactly as you're told, for once.” Dastardly. I hold my tongue. He smooths his hands over my panty-covered ass. “These will have to go.”

“I had a feeling.”

He grips the waistband of the garment, tugging them down ‘til they’re around the tops of my knees. His fingers go to the cleft in my ass, spreading my cheeks. “Lean forward a bit.” I obey. Resting my chin on the headrest, I squeeze my eyes shut, wanting this to end.

“Breathe,” he commands.

I try.

The slick, rubber tip is pressing against my asshole. It’s slippery with some kind of lube or gel. When did he have time to apply it? I’m imagining him back there, watching me in this humiliating state, and I keep my eyes shut like if I don’t see it, it’s not happening. Then he’s pushing the toy against my tight, unwilling muscles, and it’s become a reality.

My eyes pop open at the pressure. My heart starts to race, and panic fills my voice. “It’s not going in!”

“Calm down,” he croons, massaging my left ass cheek. He holds the plug in his other hand. “Bear down.”

Like I’m trying to... go to the bathroom.

As if this wasn’t already humiliating enough.

I don’t obey in the appropriate amount of time, and a sharp, punishing spank lands on

my ass.

“Okay! Okay!” I don’t need a spanking on top of what is already happening here. I push down. The tip of the toy pushes past my tight ring, a few inches going in. He applies more pressure, and I feel the most expansive part entering my tight hole.

He settles the curved handle between my ass cheeks.

“Ugh.” I feel so... full.

The fullness in my ass is a stark contrast to my pussy. I feel achingly empty like I want something inside me. Is that his goal? To make me want to beg for him?

The strange sensation of having the plug inside my ass does something unexpected. A pool of arousal forms at my pulsing entrance, threatening to draw his attention. My sweet, musky scent reaches me.

“You’re so turned on. You respond to my every touch, don’t you? Your body loves the sensations it gets from me. Look how wet you’re getting for me.”

I want to die.

He gives my ass a satisfied little pat. “All done.” He tugs my panties up my thighs and around my hips, playfully snapping the waistband back into place.

He has me turn around and sit down to put my jeans back on. I do so slowly, gently easing my weight onto the seat. Sitting puts pressure on the handle, pushing against my sensitive skin and making me feel even fuller.

My pussy gets wetter, crying for attention. Her traitorous tears dampen my panties.

This thing is his idea of a sick joke. Then a tortured realization hits me... will he have to take it out himself? Inwardly, I groan. That act will be just as humiliating as it was having him put the diabolical thing inside me.

He kisses me, cupping my face in his hand once more.

I've always wondered what my life would have been like if my father hadn't died when I was a baby. Would he and my mom be together? Would money—or lack thereof—not be an issue?

Would he have protected me from Haze?

Would I have wanted him to?

What a shameful question to ask myself. Of course, I would have wanted my father to stop Haze from entering my bedroom... wouldn't I?

But I wouldn't want to be sheltered from every part of the experience. I think of Haze's fingers inside me, how I begged for him to get me off. The brush of his soft, dark curls against my inner thighs as he nestled his head between my legs.

Then... the heat of his tongue on me.

I'd never felt anything that good before.

Hot and wet, making me feel all squirmy inside, pushing me higher and higher up a cliff until I tumbled off the edge, sliding down into a warm pool of liquid gold. But I never reached the bottom of the pool, and I knew I couldn't take any more of his torturous teasing. He laughed against me, and I felt the rumble of the sound, the air of his breath on my damp, swollen skin.

And he did it all again—making me experience incredible things I didn't know existed.

He pulls away now, his hand dropping from my face. I lean against the door, peering out the dark glass, thinking.

It would have been nice to have had a dad. I love my family and know they love me, but I always felt like something was missing. Or more like they held me at arm's length. It was almost as if they were waiting to see if I would become like my father. Seeing as they never mention his name, I get the idea they weren't fond of him.

Maybe I look too much like him for them to feel close to me. I wouldn't know. They didn't even keep a photo of him.

I know nothing about him other than that he was in a gang when we lived in Scotland—some sort of mafia, one that operated out of the city where I was born, Glasgow. Or were they in Edinburgh?

I don't even know the name of the group. I vaguely remember a curved cobblestone road leading up to a castle, like Edinburgh Castle.

My dad was carrying me in his arms, holding me tightly. Thrusting me into the arms of a woman wearing the very same pearl necklace I now own. Loud explosions rang out.

Then... nothing. That's my only memory of my father—and I don't even know if it's real, or if I made it up. Mom says I was too little to remember anything, but sometimes, when I come across the scent of cedarwood, I can feel him holding me.

When I was younger, I dreamed of a mom, a dad, maybe a sister or a brother, all of us living in a white house with a yard and trees—one we would own and not move from

each year, searching for a cheaper lease.

Can I help that I craved something more for my life?

As Haze said, maybe it was the search for a chosen family .

He's found it; maybe I can, too. Perhaps it's time to return to my mafia roots.

Don't be a fool, Ophelia.

Happy endings don't begin with abductions.

Captivity is not what I craved. Is this my punishment for not being grateful enough for the family I have? Or should I say, had? I have to be strong now and do what I can to keep them safe. I'll pretend this is my new, chosen home until I'm left alone. I'm sure the tears will come then, brought on by a lonely quiet, the despair of my hopeless, frustrating situation.

I will not cry. I hate myself for that single tear he saw earlier. There will not be anymore.

I focus on the scenery.

I'm in a freaking Twilight movie. A dense forest spreads around the Estate, creating a thick barrier between the Bachmans and the outside world. We emerge from the trees to find a heaven on earth hidden against the foothills of the Italian Alps.

The craggy mountains provide an evergreen snow-capped backdrop to a beautiful lake. The water spreads along the shore, ripples sparkling over darkness under the moonlight. I've seen the unique, vibrant colors of the water in the daytime—a blue-green, even deep aqua.

The massive, original home, the Villa, is four stories high and has walls of windows. It belongs to Liam and Emilia Bachman. We pass smaller guest houses with the same white stucco planted in the grassy green hills that surround the lake.

Each one is a little different and as stunning as the Villa.

Haze's voice breaks the spell. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"I have to admit, it is."

I come back to reality. I'm not just moving here—I'm moving here to marry him. And I don't know when I'll see my family again.

Tears threaten to come. It's all too much when I think about it, but I don't want to break down. I focus on what I need to do next. Be brave and stay strong. I can't show him weakness. No crying, and absolutely no letting him touch me again.

Like he did while I bucked against his lap, begging him for more... The memory blankets me in shame. That kind of thing cannot happen again. So, I ignore the secret, dangerous desire deep in my core.

I'm craving more. More of his dominance, more of his control. His dark, daddy ways.

We move closer to the sprawling estate, and wide, iron gates slowly open as we approach. The driver pulls through, past what looks like a security building. Men wearing uniforms are going in and out, and shiny, expensive-looking cars are lined up outside. He pulls behind the building to a small, stone lot where he parks the car and exits without a word—leaving me entirely alone with Haze.

I put my sneakers back on.

“Ready to tour your new home?”

“As ready as I can be.” I don’t let the words settle in.

They’re way too much to process. I’ll break if I think of this place as my new home. I may let this dangerous man do all sorts of things to my body, but I won’t let him mess with my mind.

Seeing as this man infuriates me, I’m sure there’s no risk of that, but still, as I walk up to the house where I’ll now be living with him, I commit myself to protecting something other than my mind.

I have deep-seated daddy issues. My attraction to Carter was born from loneliness, and I connected with Haze’s statement about the chosen family a little deeper than I’d care to admit.

I’m weak. I’m prone to false attachments. I can’t let myself fall for someone who shows me attention and protection. If I allow him access to me, I must shield the one thing that will sustain the most damage.

My heart.

CHAPTER 9

Haze

She looked adorable while kneeling against the back seat of my car, the pink plug peeking out between her pale cheeks, her long ponytail hanging over her shoulder, glossy black fingertips digging into the leather headrest.

“Get your shoes on,” I say, “We’re here.”

I’ve never seen anyone with her coloring—skin so pale, hair so dark, lips such a deep rose. Sometimes, when I glimpse her, her beauty stuns me momentarily. I watch her now as she pulls on her sneakers, bending on the seat carefully, trying to avoid putting any weight on the toy's handle.

I chose this toy because there’s no way to forget that it’s there.

She hasn’t experienced the vibrator mode yet.

“Ready to tour your new home?” I ask.

She tells me she’s as ready as possible, and I can respect that. It’s a significant change, and she’s a brave girl. I know this will be difficult for her, and I’ve tried to make her comfortable.

I know she likes things neat. So, I had the staff stock the kitchen with what I knew to be her favorite foods, place vases of fresh flowers throughout the home in her favorite

color—pink—and deep-clean the already immaculate rooms. Also, we have a Bachman-Tech computer for school, a television with all the streaming services, a brand-new wardrobe, and anything else she may need or want.

I open her car door and lead her up the brick walkway from the Alfa to the open navy-blue front door. The gold emblem of the Villa is stamped on the center of the door, and a V in a delicate font is set in the center of a gilded circle. Warm white light spills over the stoop where my house manager, Gian Conti, awaits us.

When Liam and his brothers first moved to the Villa, Gian was drawn to our world but wasn't interested in our grueling initiation process—violence, “mafia stuff” (his words), or weapons. He's a “Bachman friendly,” someone we trust to join our outer circle.

He was born locally and has an olive complexion like the other Italians in our fold. Tall and slim, he's impeccably dressed in a pinstripe suit and vest with a mint green silk tie. He wears his medium-length silver hair swept back, well-groomed, like his neatly trimmed gray beard.

Instantly, he's drawn to her. Who wouldn't be? I trust Gian completely. He's the only man I'd allow to stay here with her alone during the day when I work. But what about the other men?

Jealousy rises in my gut, green like bile. There are many eligible bachelors, many fish in the sea—or turquoise lake—and closer to her age. Our men will be respectful, but her eyes will wander the grounds.

What if she likes what she sees?

“This must be the lovely Ophelia.” Gian's genuine, wide white grin spreads over his face, not the tight smile he reserves for polite encounters. “And may I add—your

name is almost as beautiful as your striking face.”

Ophelia smiles back. She holds her hand out to shake his. “Hello?—”

“Gian.” He takes her hand, surprising her with a kiss. Of course, she blushes. He speaks with a thick accent. “I’m here to ensure you have whatever you need.”

She surprises me by answering him with an immediate request. “I could use some help studying for my Italian exam.”

Sliding his arm through hers, he guides her into the house. “I’ll show you to your room.”

And just like that, I’m the third wheel, completely unnecessary, unwanted.

My hand slides into my pants pocket for the remote to send a strong vibration through her ass. I desire her full attention. I long to review our rules and remind her of the obedience she promised me. My eager thumb slides over the small silicone remote.

I watch as she and Gian move further into the house. Her ass looks enticing in those jeans, and I picture my plug safely nestled there. I hold my thumb over the button, waiting for the right moment to strike. Once, Gian’s not looking at her face, she will be able to recover quickly enough to hide her reaction from him as the toy vibrates inside her, sending new sensations through her body.

They’ve made it over to the stone fireplace, and I’ve not yet found my opportunity. Then, he tells her he will show her how to operate the gas logs. Here is my perfect moment. I wait for a beat, giving him time to bend down, facing away from her to access the switch—my thumb still hovering.

She says something in her hesitant Italian, and he replies with beautiful words.

Her face breaks into a smile. I hear her laugh.

The sound fills the echo-y space, transforming the entire feel of the home. ‘Til this moment, it’s been a bachelor pad—two boring men, both way older than this girl who lights up the entire room with melodic peals of giggles.

I slip my hand from my pocket.

What she needs right now is a moment of normalcy. Abandoning the toy, I join them by the fireplace and touch her arm, gaining her attention. She tips her chin back, paying me a flicker of attention.

“Gian will take good care of you and get you settled in.” Would she prefer I stay?
“Unless you want me to stay,” I add.

“No. Thanks.” She backs away from me like I am someone’s pet snake that still has fangs. She turns back to Gian. “We’ll be fine.”

One minute together, and now they’re a “we?”

I growl, saying, “Gian will draw you a bath before you go to bed.” I eye her ass, letting her know that’s the time she can remove the toy. I raise my brows in question—does she understand?

She gives me a brief nod. “That sounds nice. I can wash away all the stress of the day.” Her eyes cut to mine.

I stand there for a moment, still the third wheel. Their conversation picks back up, Gian asking what time she’d like to be woken, what she thinks she might like for breakfast...

I leave them with a brief, “Goodnight.”

They both bid me a quick goodnight, effectively dismissing me.

Heading up the stairs, my hand grips the polished railing. I pause at the landing long enough to steal a parting look at her before I retreat for the evening.

She stands beside Gian, smiling in a way she never will for me.

She’s at home in her skin, rare for that age. She’s hopelessly unaware of her captivating presence. Or her classic, almost haunting beauty.

Like the view of the lake at midnight under a full moon.

Feeling my gaze on her, she turns. Our eyes meet and, the smile falls from her face, freezing somewhere between fear and confusion. My chest tightens. It’s difficult to breathe.

She does something to me. It scares me; I feel out of control.

My hand goes back into my pocket, and I push the button. She gives a start and a squeal. Her hand goes to the mantle, anchoring herself as the powerful vibrations do their work. I press the button again, turning the toy off.

She gasps and exhales. Gian says, “Are you alright, signorina?”

“Y—yes... I’m... okay.” She pauses a moment, then says, “Just nerve pain. Sciatica. It starts in the lower back and radiates down the leg. You never know when it’s going to hit.”

Clever girl—an ailment she’s probably borrowed from her grandmother.

She turns to the staircase, glaring at me. I'm the first to break our gaze as I climb the rest of the stairs. My thumb presses the button on, then off. I enjoy hearing the parting squeal from downstairs.

In the privacy of my room, I close the door. Needing to feel something solid, I lean my forehead against the back of the door, the wood cool against my skin. Harrison. What have you done?

Why have I brought this girl here?

I thought I was getting my revenge and sending a message to everyone in Italy?—

Steal from me, and I'll remove what's most precious to you.

I'm in danger with her presence in my house, her laughter in my ears, and her scent all over me. I feel like I'm back on the ice, sacrificing my body to defend the goal. I'll do anything not to let that puck slide past the end of my stick. Defend the goal above everything else.

I learned a long time ago not to trust women, not to let them get too close, and not to let the puck into the net.

I move to the dresser, hit play on the speaker, and press my palms against the smooth top. Ella Fitzgerald's warm voice and soulful, three-octave range typically ease my tension. Now, the melodic sound only makes me crave more of Ophelia. I want to hold her in my arms and slow dance with her.

Fuck! I'm not defending the goal. I'm falling fast, the hard ice welcoming my crash.

I glance in the mirror above the dresser. My hair is still on end from her fingers. I rake my hands through the curls to calm them. I watch my reflection as I slip the tie

from my pocket, where I stowed it for this moment. I breathe in the silk, inhaling her scent, and then tuck the tie safely into my top drawer.

I shower to scrub the smell of her off my skin. Instead, the warm, sudsy water reminds me of kissing her. I stroke myself with my slick, soapy hand, imagining her and all the things I've already done to her, her scent still in my nostrils.

Only a handful of hours with her, and I'm addicted. She is my drug. One I paid a pretty penny to purchase the privilege of intoxicating myself with.

Throwing on sweatpants and with still-damp hair, I pull back the covers and collapse into bed. Sometime in the night, I grab a pillow, holding it close like a desperate child. I drift off to sleep, images of her in my mind.

Sometime in the night, a shadow at my open door wakes me. At first, I think it's a dream, but then she steps into a beam of moonlight streaming through the window, and I see her face. She lifts the covers and, suddenly, is beside me. My arms wrap around her, and I can feel her warmth, her beating heart.

Calmness settles over me like a weighted blanket.

When I awake, I inhale her light floral scent from my pillow before opening my eyes. I turn my head, eager to greet her.

The bed is empty.

It was a dream.

Heaviness sinks in my chest. I drag my body upright, raking my hands through my hair. Now I'm imagining her in the night as well as the day.

I'm in grave danger. I'm falling. This time, when I land, I'm not hitting the ice.

This time, I'm hitting rock bottom.

And I fear I'll be destroyed.

CHAPTER 10

Ophelia

My toes pinch soft fibers, digging down to find the bottom of the carpet. It's so thick and luxurious, I can't. Knowing the plug will be out soon, I ignore it as best I can as I sit on the green velvet chaise, waiting for Gian to finish. The sound of running water and Gian humming quietly to himself calms me.

Gian and I became fast friends, and as cold as my captor seems, I will need a confidant. Gian comes out of the bathroom, smiling at me.

"All done. Enjoy." He bids me goodnight and leaves me with a soft kiss on my cheek.

He closes the door behind him, and I welcome the silence. Finally alone, I stand, my muscles clenching the toy. I should undress and get this thing out. A thick, white terry robe is laid out on the bed, a gold braiding sewn down its edges. I run my fingers over the plush fabric, finding an emblem on the chest, a large "V" in the center of a circle made of a pretty design.

"V" for the Villa—my new home.

The word "home" brings up feelings and memories—my mom and grandparents sitting at the table with me, Grandma scooping too-large portions of her famous shepherd's pie onto my chipped china plate, one from the set she'd brought over from Scotland, calling the china an heirloom. Grandpa is teasing that the pearl necklace I wear is the only thing of value we own. I laugh along as Grandma playfully hits him

on the shoulder with her wooden spoon, feeling warm but guilty for wanting more than the smallness of this apartment, this table, my family.

I love them all, but as I mature, I want more. I should have been more grateful. Is this my punishment?

Push it down, Ophelia. Too much.

I take off my clothes, and the cool air chills my skin as I slip my arms into the robe and try the belt tightly around my waist. I glance down at the Villa emblem lying against my chest. The Villa—not home, but where I’ll be staying.

For now.

I run my fingers over the pink velvet coverlet as I move further into the room, toward the gleaming white door inviting me in. How is it possible for a bathroom to be even more beautiful than a bedroom? The tile is like ice under my bare feet as I walk over the snow-white tiles to the Olympic-sized pool of a hot tub bath—oval, deep, with porcelain as white and spotless as the floors and the tiled walls.

It’s filled with steaming water and frothy foam, with red petals scattered over the sparkling bubbles. Leaning down, I inhale the scent of lavender and rose.

Losing the robe, I ease into the tub. My hands grip the cold porcelain as I sink further into the warm water. “Oh, my God—that feels glorious.” I’m moaning as each inch of me disappears under the heavenly-scented foam.

I lean the back of my head against the tub's edge, staring up at the ceiling. There are no water marks or stains. The bubbles tickle my skin as they froth around me, only my head and shoulders exposed. I’m alone and relaxed for the first time since Carter climbed into my window tonight.

So why am I glancing at the bathroom door, listening for footsteps?

Am I... hoping...

For him?

“Don’t be silly.” I roll the back of my head right, then left against the porcelain. My shoulder is sore from where the seat belt dug into me, snapping me back against the seat earlier tonight. I sink deeper into the warm water to soak it up.

I think about his ex and the image of her screaming into the night, the headlights eerily illuminating her face. He probably made her that way. And if they had a baby together... if he has a child... I didn’t agree to this marriage in the first place, but if you add in a baby and an ex who almost ran us off the road, I’d be foolish not to run for my life.

The man stole me from my home, spanked me, put a thing in me, and... I raise my hand out of the water, breaking the surface. Spreading my fingers, I watch the bubbles glide down over my skin.

He’s done all these things and more to me?—

And I’ve never felt more alive.

I chastise myself, berate myself.

I tell myself he should be here to remove his torture device himself. I’m listening for his approach because I don’t want to be the one to have to do it. I am lying to myself, pretending I’m looking at the door again because I don’t want to figure out how to get rid of the toy alone.

Not because I want him here.

I'm crazy for not climbing out that window right now, for sinking further into this bathtub instead of trying to sneak out into the night.

I breathe a fake sigh, telling myself I'm relieved I'm alone and he's somewhere else in this gorgeous house. He's not coming. This is a do-it-yourself kind of job. I plunge my hand back into the water, fingers creeping between my legs. Lifting my ass from the bottom of the tub, I grip the silicone handle of the plug and give it a little tug.

Nothing happens.

Groaning, I let go, my hand floating to the surface. For a moment, I consider calling for him. That would be even more humiliating than figuring it out on my own.

Do you pull it out fast, like ripping off a Band-Aid? I don't think so. I remember how it felt when he was putting it in—a slow ease, a fullness. Determined, I grip the handle. “Come on. Don't be a baby.” I tug harder, like I mean it, and I gain some traction this time. I keep pulling, the middle of the toy widening my channel as it moves downward. Finally, it pops out.

I wiggle my hips. Where there was fullness is now an aching emptiness. Of course, my traitorous mind goes straight to the thought of him fulfilling his promise. What would it feel like if he were to take me... there?

My pussy clenches at the thought. “Me first,” she says. Greedy little thing, not wanting to be overlooked by him. His mouth. His fingers. His... well, we all know what I'm imagining.

I leave the toy in the bath, hiding under the bubbles. I can't look at it. I'll deal with it in the morning. Moving to the shower, I rinse the bubbles from my skin, scrub

everywhere, then wash my hair. I'm so tired I debate sleeping on my wet hair, but let's be honest, I always complete the task at hand.

Shivering, I dress quickly and climb into bed, enveloped by the luxury of Egyptian cotton, and high thread counts, and my warm, clean hair. My head rests on the pillow brought from home, and my quilt is pinched between my fingers, like a child with a special blanket.

I wake restless in the unfamiliar, luxurious setting of my room. Still, being in a new house, and such a different one to my own, I can't sleep. I don't know what comes over me, but now I'm tiptoeing down the hall to his room, praying his hardwood floorboards don't squeak.

I enter his room, staring at him as he sleeps. He looks so peaceful, so innocent. I know better. His eyelids blink open.

At first, I detect irritation in his eyes. My heart drops. I turn to leave. In my weakness, I take a last look at him. I find confusion in his gaze, not annoyance.

He's barely awake, if even.

Lifting the blanket with trembling fingers, I crawl into his bed.

I hold my breath as my skin hits the cold sheets in the empty place next to him, and I await the humiliation of his rejection. Instantly, he surrounds me—warm and protective. He smells of clean soap and a sleeping man.

The adrenaline that hardened my muscles as I crept down the hall now slowly releases, softening me. He buries his face in my hair. The barely there scruff along his chin scrapes lightly over my skin. Tingles dance over my scalp as he nuzzles against my neck.

I melt into the protective cocoon of his embrace.

He seems like a heavy sleeper. I'm an early riser, and I can sneak out before he wakes up. I allow myself to sleep.

At four a.m., my eyes pop open like they've done every morning since I hit puberty. I find the habit annoying, but my grades don't come easily, and with as much effort as I have to put into my schoolwork, I've often counted it as a blessing. Now, my ungodly natural wake-up hour allows me to leave undetected.

It's bad enough I wished for him when I was in the bath—did I have to come crawling into his bed last night, too? Like a lost little girl awakened by a nightmare, tiptoeing into her father's room for warmth, security, and comfort.

I move slowly, creeping out from under his arm. He moans, turning onto his back. His face—angelic and peaceful—is so beautiful that a pang tears through my chest at the sight. The same feeling came over me during our school trip to Rome when we toured the Sistine Chapel.

Still, I don't know why I came to him.

I press the fluffy duvet around him, hoping the blanket's warmth will keep him asleep. Then, I crawl to the edge of the mattress. He moans again and turns toward the wall, his naked back now facing me: smooth olive skin, curved muscles.

His shoulders... those are man shoulders.

I fight the urge to crawl back under the covers and press my face against his warm, bare skin. I won't. I am more intelligent than that.

After my foolish decision to sneak into his bed in the first place, I need to leave and

get to my schoolwork. I slip from the room, pulling the door almost closed behind me but not engaging the latch. I can barely believe I chose him for my comfort on my first night away from home.

I wash my face and brush my teeth and hair in my room. Then, I quickly put on black joggers, a white T-shirt, and a gray hoodie from home. I leave my hair down and head to the door. Passing the mirror, I glance at my reflection.

I look...presentable.

Should I at least put on a little mascara?

For whom, Ophelia? I chide myself.

Will a bit of makeup take you from your solid six, maybe six point five in a dress, to his solid ten?

Look around this place. His car. His face. Those shoulders. The man's probably got supermodels lined up on his online dating accounts.

I'd be his swipe left, and that's fine with me.

Pfft.

I grab my backpack, slinging it over my shoulder, and think how nice it was that Haze carried my stuff to the car last night. Carter never offered to help me before. I think back... nope, not even when I was carting a storage bin of dictionaries to a classroom on the third floor for French Club.

Carter never took you prisoner, either. Or stuck anything up your ass...

Okay, okay, moving on.

The smell of freshly brewed espresso and something newly baked hits me as I descend the stairs. I tiptoe around the corner, peeking in the kitchen. Gian stands by the oven, an icing bag in his hands.

“I heard you like those little American cardboard pastries you put in the toaster. I decided to make my own. Fresh fruit filling and no preservatives. Better for your health.” He turns over his shoulder to toss me a smile. “Though you have flawless skin despite your teen diet.”

The scent is divine. This must have been a lot of work. “You do not have to go through this trouble for me! I can make oatmeal or something.”

He raises his thick brows. “Sit.”

“Yes, sir,” I laugh.

The one time I don’t have to question myself for allowing a man to boss me around—when he’s about to feed and caffeinate me. I slip into one of the high-top barstools at the counter, pulling my computer from my backpack.

“Here you go, T esoro .” He slides a vanilla latte with a cinnamon sprinkle across the counter without my even making a request.

Wrapping my hands around the heat of the clay mug, I bring it to my face, inhaling the sweet-spicy scent. “Gian, you’re too much.”

“I think I’m just enough.” He plucks a perfectly iced pastry from the cooling rack, popping it onto a plate. “Now, how do you say it’s a lovely morning to study in French?”

CHAPTER 11

Haze

The morning sun comes in through the windows, blinding me as I feel for her in my empty arms. I blink. Twice. She's not here. I pull my pillow closer, inhaling deeply. I swear her sweet scent lingers on the pillowcase. My memory tortures me, playing flashes of her crawling into my bed for no other reason than to seek comfort from me.

I'm a deep sleeper and sometimes wake up not knowing up from down—another reason my dad called me Haze. This is one of those mornings, my mind a dense fog.

She was never in my bed.

Even when my head is clear, the girl has my mind turning like one of those toy tops you twist between your fingers, release, and watch spin right up to the edge of the table before it falls off, hitting the floor.

I'm tumbling. Soon, I'll crash.

Shirtless, sweatpants hanging low on my hips, I leave the bed, padding barefoot down the hall to her room. I run a hand down my bare chest, feeling my warm, smooth skin to ensure I'm awake. I lean against the frame of her doorway, searching for evidence she was with me.

She's not in here, either. The piles of feather duvets I had Gian buy her are rumpled on her empty bed, proving she slept here last night. Her coming to me was nothing

more than a dream. Of course, it was.

After all, what girl crawls into her monster's bed for comfort?

I clean up her bathtub for her, tucking the toy safely away in my own bathroom. I shower and dress, preparing myself for the day ahead. I don't spend enough time on my appearance, not as much as the day warrants.

I'm greeted at the top of the stairs with the scent of baking pastries and coffee. The thought of having either turns my stomach. I have a huge task before me, and waking up with my head in a daze over her is not the start I need.

Caffeine and sugar won't help me.

When I reach the bottom step, I hear her voice; she's speaking to Gian. I come around the corner and stand in the kitchen doorway, taking in the scene. She's perched on the edge of a stool at my kitchen island, wearing comfortable clothing and looking right at home. Her long, shiny hair hangs down her back, a strand falling over her face as she leans forward, scanning her computer screen. Seeing her so at home here sends a pang through my chest, a feeling I can't speak to.

The vision leaves my mind even more muddled.

Her and Gian's buddy-buddy hangout makes me want to eliminate my loyal house manager. I'm infuriated by their close bond and how almost instantly it formed. However, I would never get rid of him because of her. I want her to have the best care, and I know he can provide it when I'm unavailable. And I love him dearly. He means as much to me as the brothers do. Don't tell him that. I don't need him asking for favors.

Which—I know he'll be doing shortly. He's as soft as he is hard. There's no way he

doesn't fall for those baby blues soon enough, asking me to make concessions for her, to make things easier for her, to bend the rules for her.

Spoiling is no issue. I'm happy to buy her anything she wants or needs. However, rules are rules, and I won't bend them for her. The only thing I'll be bending will be her over my lap when she breaks them.

Ophelia

Over the most delicious fruit pastries and lattes I've ever had, Gian helps me conjugate verbs. I'm so lost in changing the word for "break" into "breaks" and "broke," I don't hear him come down the stairs.

Haze, appropriately named for the current look in his eyes, stands under the arched entrance to the kitchen. Dressed in a blue button-down and black trousers, he looks from me to Gian, then back to me, barely more awake than when I crawled into his bed last night.

Even Gian looks surprised at his boss's state. "You all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost!" Gian eyes him, asking, "Did you not sleep well?"

"I—I don't know." Haze shakes his head. "I kinda woke up in a haze. Strange dreams, I guess."

"I know just what you need. A double shot of my good Italian espresso in a latte." Gian goes to the machine to start steaming the milk.

"None for me." Haze shakes his head.

"Juice?" Gian offers.

“I’m good.” Raking a hand through his unruly curls, Haze clears his throat, his tone going low and gruff. “Ah, I’ve got some work to take care of. I’ll be gone a few hours.”

A few hours?

My heart sinks. I should be relieved he’ll be out of the way for a few hours. I’m perfectly comfortable with Gian. Still, I find the idea of Haze not being here for the whole day sad and disappointing. I want him here with me.

And that is a dangerous thought.

Haze locks eyes with me. He warns, “Do not leave this house.”

“Leave?” I can’t help the sassy tone in my reply. “You mean, bypass the guards, the guardhouse, the cameras, and sneak off into the woods on foot? Not to mention the tracker you’ve probably stuck up my—” The heat of humiliation rises to my hairline when I remember Gian is in the room. I want to accuse Haze of sticking a tracker up my ass with the vibrating plug; instead, I try to save my pride with a weak, “nose or something when I was sleeping.”

Dropping his gaze, Haze says, “You’ll be well taken care of here with Gian.”

“Of course she will!” Gian offers brightly. “We have much studying to do. The workload at this prestigious school is not a joke.”

“I’ll be fine. Gian is very attentive. He’s already given me more than I need.” I add, “And he’s been kind as well.”

Haze’s dark gaze finally focuses on me, his eyes cold. “Some of us haven’t been used and can afford to be kind.” The ice in his tone shocks me.

A shiver goes through me. He's so different from the man who held me in his arms hours ago, nuzzling against my neck...

Now, breezing through the kitchen, he's moving like he can't escape me fast enough. He's out of the room before I can blink. I stare down the hallway as Haze leaves us behind. I lose sight of him. A moment later, there's a sound of a chime dinging, a signal that someone's opened the front door.

He's gone.

CHAPTER 12

Haze

I leave the house abruptly, hating myself for my lack of manners. The walk to Liam and Emilia's home, the OG Villa, is a path along the water. The lake is picturesque, and I take it in, hoping the quiet lapping of the aquamarine water will steady my nerves.

I feel... ruffled. I glance down at my perfectly pressed shirt. Liam knows how much I admire him as the head of this family branch. Does my current state of dress show him that respect?

Should I have worn a tie?

I'm overthinking. Another one of my many faults. Along with underdressing at precisely the wrong time. Neither is as bad as my most recent sin of becoming impassioned with an eighteen-year-old.

My obsession with her and her intoxicating scent is simply a hazard that has come with the engagement. A roadblock I must navigate so it doesn't stand in the way of my success. But being with Ophelia has made all other women seem to disappear.

Trigger the hazard lights.

It feels dirty to want someone so young. Wrong to corrupt such a naive innocent. But the look in her eyes, her smell, the way she moans when I touch her...

She's all woman.

Ophelia's mother, Leah, was the culprit and is much closer to my age. A genuinely unholy thought tears through me: if I married Leah instead of taking Ophelia, that would make her my daughter. Instead, I drove by a girl at a trash can and became obsessed with Leah's daughter.

At first glance.

"My head is seriously fucked." Right when I'm walking into one of the most important meetings of my life. The wind is cold as it blows over the water. I shove my hands in my pockets. Fuck the necktie—I should have worn a coat.

I think of Ophelia in her bedroom at home when I made her get a coat last night—was that only last night? It feels like a lifetime ago. She shrugged her arms into the sleeves and, with an adorable face and a tone bordering on sassy, asked me if I was happy.

Happy.

I've never been happy. Someone took that away from me long ago. I need to go back to a past life and fix things which is why my freezing, rumpled ass is now walking to Liam's house to demand a promotion.

My mind is a turnstile; I didn't even realize I'd reached Liam's home. I stand in front of the pristine white mansion where Liam now happily lives with his lovely wife of many years, Emilia, by his side. And here I am, underdressed and in the middle of a serious head fuck.

I climb the white stone stairs. The camera set in the brick reads my face, and the door swings open. Emilia rushes to greet me.

Her blonde curls bounce around her face as she ushers me into the foyer. “Come in! Come in! It’s been too long since I’ve seen your handsome face, Haze.”

“Emilia.” I greet her softly with a kiss on her cheek. “You look lovely as always.”

“Stop. I’m getting old. You’re the good-looking one in this scenario. Speaking of beautiful young things... did my friend reach out to you? Sylvie?”

“Sylvie?” I ask curiously. “Remind me.”

“She has a daughter, Sophie. Sophie is beautiful, smart, and highly successful in her investment company. Married to her work.” She pats the following words on my shoulder, one at a time, a gentle touch for each syllable. “Just. Your. Type.”

My type? Is my boss’s wife attempting to play matchmaker again? Did Liam not tell Emilia about Ophelia or my plans to marry her? I stand there, unsure of how to answer.

Emilia stares up at me, her nose wrinkling. “Oh, you’re gun-shy after everything that happened with that horrible dating profile.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “Please, you have to let that go. We’ll NEVER trust a computer with your future again. My friend Sylvie’s daughter Sophie would be PERFECT for your rebound.”

“Perfect. Right.” I nod. Then, I remember a voicemail I received—and ignored—sometime last week.

‘Hi, Liam, this is Sylvie Day, Emilia’s friend. Anyway (light, slightly embarrassed laughter), Emilia and I were talking about my Sophie. All work and no play and that sort of thing, you know? Emilia gave me your number, and we just thought it would be so great if we could get you kids together...’

It just got worse from there. Cringe. I clear my throat. “Sylvie, that’s right. I do remember now! Yes, I did get a voicemail from her, but—wait a moment—” I turn my head toward the arched doorway of her library, her baby, the one thing that will take her mind off my dating life. “Liam mentioned you added a record collection to your library. Can I take a look?”

“Oh, you’ve not seen the Victrola yet?” Emilia beams. “Come, come! You like jazz, don’t you? I think I remember that about you.”

I follow behind her to the library. I try to pay attention as she shows me how the Victrola works. If I were honest, I think of how I’d introduce myself to Sylvie’s daughter, Sophie. I imagine it going something like this...

Hi, Sophie. Your mom did you a disservice by giving me your number. I go by Haze, but my name is Harrison. Besides interpersonal relationships, my worst fear is the brotherhood calling me Harry. I love jazz and revenge. I have a habit of underdressing, and my timing is terrible. Oh, and my manners could use a polish.

I shake my head. I’m losing what little sanity I had. Focus, Haze.

I clear my mind, turning my life into bullet points as I sing the words along with Emilia. She’s shocked I’ve agreed and compliments my voice. It’s good enough to convince her I’m with her as I let my mind wander.

Leah humiliated me.

Disrespected me.

Stole my hope.

Stole my money.

I've taken her daughter.

I've got my fiancée.

I've gotten my revenge.

I consider us even.

Ophelia is a pawn—a means to an end. A wife to make me captain. Nothing more. I shove thoughts of her down till it's all business. Forget her supple body, her intoxicating smell, the lingering sweetness of her taste. Then there are the things that keep me up at night, like her wit, strength, and that image of her standing by that damn trash can.

Cleaning supplies, garbage, and menial daily tasks are somehow at complete odds with her breathtaking perfection.

Hold it all down until all thoughts of her are business.

Stay focused on the end goal.

Liam finds us in the library. I innocently twirl Emilia as we dance to her favorite Miles Davis song. He stands in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

A slow smile comes over his face, making his onyx eyes sparkle as he says, "Don't make me jealous, young man. I'd have to kill you."

Dropping Emilia's hand, I step back. "You'd have to kill the lot of us bachelors. Your wife is the envy of the brotherhood."

He steps in, taking her into his arms. He gives her body an elegant twirl, dipping her

into a back bend. He lowers his mouth to hers, giving her a deep kiss meant for the bedroom.

I look away.

She giggles as he rights her. Playfully, she pushes him away, her cheeks a rosy pink. “Stop it, you two! You certainly know how to make a lady blush.”

“How can you not be admired when you’re as beautiful as the day we met,” Liam says, drawing her in again.

Emilia winds her arms around his neck, staring into his eyes. “And what a meeting that was.”

The two of them start kissing. Again. I move toward the doorway, hovering between the hall and the library. I’m wondering if I should excuse myself.

Emilia says, “Let me make you both some fresh coffee.” Patting her already perfect hair, she excuses herself, brushing past me and leaving the scent of lavender floating in the air.

“None for me, thanks,” I say.

“Really?” Her light brows shoot up. “Are you sure? I can make tea if you’d rather.” The expression on her face tells me I’ve said the wrong thing. I’ve forgotten my manners. Again.

Liam steps in to save me. “We’ll be fine, baby. After our meeting, you and I can have a French press by the pool.”

“Alright then. If you’re sure...” She gives me a final look of disapproval before

hurrying deeper into the house.

Assessing me, Liam smooths a hand over his beard.

I didn't realize it was a cardinal sin to turn down coffee. With my current state, a heady caffeine buzz is the last thing I need.

"Do I need to send flowers tomorrow?" I ask.

"No." What he demands next is far worse than writing an apology note to go with the bouquet. "But when I tell Emilia about your new fiancée, she will immediately invite you both to dinner. And you will have to accept."

"Of course. Of course I will," I lie.

He nods. "And you can bring the flowers then."

Dinner under the scrutinous eye of the perfect married couple is the last thing my teen bride and I need. A positive to finally being engaged? "At least your wife won't be trying to fix me up anymore."

His dark eyes narrow.

I've said the wrong thing. Attempting to fix my mistake, I try, "I mean, I know she means well and all?—"

"Let's go to my office." He cuts me off, turning sharply on the heel of his black polished boot. "We have a lot to discuss."

My mind wanders as we wind through the halls of the house. Jesus, this meeting is off to a dastardly start. Where did that word even come from?

I'm sure Emilia and Liam would agree with Ophelia's assessment of me as insufferable.

We reach his office, which is now primarily used as a cigar and brandy lounge. Emilia often redecorates this room, which today has navy walls framed with thick white crown molding, paintings of the snow-capped mountains behind the aqua lake, and wood and leather furnishings.

Two plush chairs are angled toward the fireplace. It's a dreary day, and the room is chilly. The windows frame the gray skies outside. With a flick of Liam's wrist, the gas logs in the fireplace glow, warming the space.

He wears the latest Bachman watch on his wrist. It has a broad silver face and a casual black and brown braided leather band. Only captains and above have that kind of tech. I still have to turn on my fireplace the old-fashioned way.

Liam points to one of the chairs. "Sit."

I sit.

Slowly, he sinks into his own, crossing one long leg over the other. The time it takes him to arrange his tall body is painful. Resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, he brings his fingertips together, matching each pair one at a time, uniting the pads of his fingertips.

Pinky finger. Middle finger. Pointer finger. Thumb. The ring fingers come together. Finally. Clicking together like magnets. The platinum wedding band on his left hand gleams in the firelight.

I hadn't realized Liam has a flair for dramatics.

Finally, he asks, “Where’s your ring?” So, the man is capable of speaking.

With everything that’s transpired since I stepped into her bedroom last night, I forgot about the wedding ceremony I canceled.

Unfortunately, he’s going to want an answer.

CHAPTER 13

Ophelia

“He didn’t even say goodbye.” The words slip from me. I bite my bottom lip, ashamed I said them out loud.

“He may be a grump,” Gian says, “but he’s a good man.”

I think of my family being lied to. They’re imagining me off seeing the world on the Bachman dime. What a joke. I’m here. Captive. Paying my debt off one earth-shattering orgasm at a time.

“No,” I murmur. “He’s not.”

“Good men in this world are hard to come by. I’m fiercely loyal to the entire Bachman family. But Harrison has me tied to him in a way I can’t explain. After what he did for me...”

Gian’s voice trails off. He moves to the sink, ending that line of the conversation. What did Haze do for Gian? I can feel it’s not right to ask. Instead, I listen as he continues.

“Bachmans live by their codes.” Gian turns on the tap to fill the sink. “And you may not like those codes, but they’re right in their own right. A man who lives and dies by his morals is good.” Gian glances at me. “Even if what you think he does is bad.”

“Me and the law agree he’s bad,” I say. I stand from the stool, ready to take over cleaning the kitchen. “Here. Let me do that.”

“Uh-uh.” He shakes his head at me, then points to the doorway. “You are going to read about humans' impact on biodiversity so we can rewrite your essay.”

“This kitchen is so gorgeous. It’d be fun to clean.” I stare at the pile of dishes, itching to take the work from him. He’s already done the baking.

“You’re wasting precious time.” He adds a squeeze of dish soap.

I give my final, feeble attempt. “You know my biology teacher only gives partial credit for redo’s. Are you sure it’s worth it?”

“When we reviewed your schooling for today, you told me about your grade on the first try. Can you remind me?” he asks, already knowing the grade because I had to explain the school’s unfamiliar-to-him grading system, thus making him aware I’m doing terribly.

I shrug. “A 64.” I don’t tell him I’m in the lowest level class, too. The easy one. The one the other kids call the “baby class.”

“Oh, it’s worth it. It’s certainly worth it.” He nods to himself, turning off the tap. “Go on. I’ve already got the fireplace on for you.”

Remembering the tub, I make an excuse to go upstairs. “Thank you. I’m just going upstairs to grab something.”

“Alright.”

I need to tidy up. I’m sure a daily cleaner is coming to this spotless house, and I don’t

need the humiliation of what they will find. I pop into my bathroom. The tub is drained, sparkling white, and the toy is gone.

I don't know what to think or how to feel. Here, Haze has taken care to preserve my dignity, yet he put the thing inside of me in the first place. I think of the warmth of his arms holding me last night, so different from the coldness in his eyes this morning.

After making my bed perfectly, I head back downstairs while trying not to think about the confusing state of my life.

I can't keep my worry about my family at bay for long. Despite my best efforts, the words start to blur on the pages. My gaze travels to the flames licking the logs in the fireplace. Red at their tips, they change to orange and blue in the center. Like my mother's dress the last time I saw her, its circular pattern orange on the outer ring with red spokes leading to a blue center.

Yesterday morning seems like a lifetime ago. I'm still puzzled that Mom told me she'd paid my full tuition right after we lost our scholarship. And that she told me not to worry about adult stuff when I asked her where she'd gotten the money, which upset me.

It's not like I'm the average teen, hanging with friends and staying up till midnight scrolling on the phone. I'm working or studying with my time.

I also didn't like that she wouldn't meet my eye.

Now I know why she was acting weird. Still, I can't picture my sweet, young mother stealing, much less from the mafia. I trust Haze when he says my family isn't hurt, but I must talk to Mom. I need to know everyone is okay, and I want to know what she did to get the money.

I think of Carter on the ground below my window, groaning in pain. I believe Haze when he promised me that Carter was taken home safely, but what about this morning? Did he arrive at school safe and sound, except for a few scratches?

I trust Haze.

Maybe it's ridiculous, maybe I'm naive, but I trust him. Hearing Gian say how tied he is to Haze doesn't hurt either. Still, how he went from warm last night to cold this morning left ice in my veins. That coldness makes me question him. I need to hear from my family and make sure they are safe.

Can Gian help me?

"Can I get you anything?" Gian's voice breaks through my thoughts, jolting me to the present. He stands at the doorway, a helpful look in his eyes.

"Maybe..." I say.

"Anything," he says, expecting a request he can fulfill in the kitchen. An espresso machine can't cash in this favor. Though a second latte would be incredible.

"I have a question..." I start. "But it's a bit delicate."

He looks up for a moment, contemplating. "Ask away, and if I can answer, I will."

"Okay..." I hope he can answer because this question has been burning in my mind. How do I word it? "Does Haze have any children?"

Gian pauses a moment and then breaks into a big belly laugh. "God, no!"

What about the woman in the street who shrieked like the devil and wore a gray coat?

“Really?” I ask. “Not even, like, a baby hidden away somewhere?”

“Absolutely not.” He shakes his head, recovering from his laughter. “Anything else before we begin work on your essay, my dear?”

“There is one more thing,” I say.

The smile fades from his face as he reads mine. He knows it will be a big ask before I even make the plea.

“I hate to put you in this position after all you’ve done to make me feel welcomed.” Hearing my tone, he looks away, knowing I’m not asking for more baked goods. I take a deep breath, stealing my nerves. “I need to talk to my family.”

Staring at the floor, he shakes his head. “I can’t help you with that. We’re under strict instructions to have no contact with any members of your family right now?—”

Desperation leaks into my tone. “I need to hear my mother’s voice.”

Gian relents after what feels like fifteen minutes but can only have been a long moment. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Don’t get yourself into any trouble, but if there’s any way to make it possible?—”

He holds up his hand, stopping me. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I feel a flutter of hope. “Thanks.”

“Moving on,” he says. “Now, let’s get back to that essay.”

“Great.” I pull out a clean sheet of paper and stare at the blank lines.

Gian prompts me, and I attempt to explain how urbanization causes habitat loss, but my only thought is of contacting my family...

And what will Haze do to me if he finds out I tried?

CHAPTER 14

Haze

He wants his answer, and he wants it now.

Don't run your hand through your hair, Haze. It's your tell. I take a deep breath and steel my nerves.

Clearing my throat, I attempt to compensate for my earlier poor manners of turning down his wife's hospitality by offering gratitude. "Thank you for arranging last night with Ophelia's family. Everything went smoothly on my end." And hopefully I will avoid the topic of the ring I'm missing from my left ring finger. "How did things go here? I'm guessing Emilia hasn't been filled in?"

"The mom and grandfather were exuberant that she'd been chosen for the study abroad program. The grandmother is shrewd. Sharp. She looked a little less convinced. Emilia doesn't need to know just yet."

"Okay. Why?—"

He moves on quickly before I can bring up he's not told his wife I'm getting married. Narrowing his gaze, he demands again, "Where is your ring?"

"I picked Ophelia up last night while you distracted her family. Then I brought her back to my house. Woke up this morning and came straight here." I hope my lie comes out smoother than the shaky hand I run through my hair. "There wasn't time

for a wedding.”

There’s a sliver of truth in my statement; my obsession with doing sexy things with my naive virgin did take up most of my time.

He counters with the truth. “Charlie came into town for this. She even dragged the Beast out of his lair to help her, which, as you can imagine, he was NOT happy with.”

Ah yes, Nikolaos Bachman, the Beast from Greece. He walks around with his massive biceps peeking out of his olive-green shirt and heavy black boots on his feet, worthy of his military background. He’s grouchy and hates leaving the mansion on Dark Island, once his bachelor cave, but turned into a beautiful bed and breakfast by his flowery, feminine wife, Charlie, to host the family.

I’m going to owe him Cuban cigars after this.

“Charlie had everything prepared for a ceremony. She and the Beast spent hours decorating the pool house with fresh flowers. She even had two slices of cake waiting for you.” He gives a shameful groan. “Which I ended up stress eating for breakfast.”

Liam never eats sugar... this is bad.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He says, “I can’t tell you how disappointed she was when Father Thomas called her to tell her you’d canceled at the last minute.”

“It’s true,” I admit. “I called Father Thomas on the way to Ophelia’s house last night. I told him the wedding was off, but I’d be in touch.”

The whole truth is I was too chicken to kidnap a girl of eighteen that I'd never met AND make her my wife all in a matter of a few hours when I've been alone for so long.

I've never denied my commitment issues.

"I'll call him as soon as we're ready." I think of Emilia and her efforts to set me up. It didn't sound like she was informed about any of this. "How did Emilia take it?"

"In the end, I didn't tell Emilia about your plans with Ophelia because I feared you wouldn't go through with the wedding," he confesses. "I didn't want to disappoint her."

"That's...good." I'm equal parts embarrassed he already knew I'd back out, and relieved Emilia wasn't informed in the first place.

He eyes me. "Don't leave it too long. I'm glad you have Ophelia now. I hate the dissociative state you've been in for the past ten years. Bianca was one wild ride. After being stalked by her, I understood why you swore off relationships."

"I'm sure you've already heard about her appearing last night," I say.

His brows rise. "Bianca stopping you in the road? Yes. I heard about that and how she brought up the baby again. I'm glad you finally asked us to keep tabs on her. I worry about her mental health. The fact that she's still holding onto her false pregnancy story, pretending there was a baby to keep you around, then to find out months later that she never was pregnant..." His words trail off for a moment.

"It was a trying time." Bianca was a strong, sexy woman who kept my interest until she didn't. When I broke things off, she became violent. When that didn't work, she tried to fake a pregnancy.

His voice pulls me from my memories as he says, “It’s the Bachman in us that makes us desire to protect all women fiercely, but Bianca...”

“We’re the ones who need protecting from her,” I finish for him.

He nods in agreement. “All this to say, I understood why you stopped dating after Bianca. I was hopeful when you let Emilia make the dating profile for you?—”

“Huge mistake,” I say. “I was drunk that night.”

“Sometimes the heart gets what it wants after a few whiskeys,” he counters. “But in the end, it was a mistake when your first dip into the online dating pool ended so disastrously. I was worried.”

The only reason I let Emilia make that damn online dating profile in the first place was because I had one too many whiskeys, and she begged.

I attempt to... “open up.” An awful metallic taste comes to my mouth at the thought of sharing emotions. Blech. “I understand your concern.” New at this kind of thing, I find myself searching for words. “It’s true. I found—hope—in the messages I exchanged with Leah...”

My mind wanders, thinking of those messages; one in particular found a place in my mind.

Four lines of one poem which have stuck with me since the moment I read them on my computer screen.

The void inside grows deeper still.

I search and seek but cannot fill.

Did I create the chasm on my own?

Or was I born to be alone?

“The betrayal left me...” I search for words. The online connection first sparked hope. When all was taken away, the hope turned to anger. The anger died, leaving me empty. I settle for, “Cold and detached.”

Deep in thought, he stares at me, waiting for me to expand on my statement. His silence and the glare from his dark eyes are unnerving. Under his heavy gaze, I become like Ophelia, turning into a motormouth in my angst.

I continue with, “Yes, I should have gone through with the ceremony last night but didn’t.”

“No, you shouldn’t have gone through with the wedding if you didn’t want to marry this girl.” Still, he stares. Wordless. His fingertips press together harder. He wants more explanation, but I’m unsure of what. “I thought you wanted to marry her; I thought that’s why you brought her here.”

“I did. I do. I mean—” I want her, I do. But what I need now is more important. “I’m ready to be made captain.”

His entire forehead seems to fold together, his brows rising, his skin reddening. His tone is part anger, part sadness. “Is that all this whole thing was about? Is becoming captain the only reason you created the dating profile you made with Emilia? The only reason for your revenge bride kidnapping last night? Our dinner ruse last night to get her family off the scent? None of it was for love?”

Love? I’m stunned. When did that dirty little four-letter word come into play?

As Liam keeps talking, I feel the color drain from my face, my goal slipping from my fingers. He says, “What you’re telling me is that all this was done for the end goal of becoming captain and not for a relationship?”

“My end goal was to be made captain. You said I had to be settled. That’s why I was looking for a wife. I thought you knew that.”

His head drops into his hands as he shakes it. Disappointment drips from his words. “I’d had hope that you... I don’t know—I thought you might be interested in Ophelia.”

“I was. I mean...” A debilitating ache tore through my empty chest the day I saw her throwing away a bag of garbage.

But I feel that’s NOT what Liam is talking about here.

The meeting is going horribly, dastardly, even.

I picture a jet losing its engine, spiraling toward the earth, then the other engine blowing up, massive flames engulfing the aircraft. The aircraft burns, crashing to the ground, leaving devastation in its wake.

What can I say?

I offer a meek, “I’ve brought her here to make her my wife. Isn’t that enough?”

“Enough to become a captain in this family?” He gives me a hard stare, then shakes his head. “No.”

My stomach drops. A cold sweat breaks out across my hairline. He said if I were settled down, he’d consider me for captain.

I lean forward. “She’s agreed to marry me. I’ll call Father Thomas right now?—”

“There’s more to moving up than wearing a wedding ring.” His words fall like dominoes around me.

Trying to keep my tone respectful, I remind him, “You told me that if I was to be fit for captain, I needed to be settled. Married. Attached. Those were your words. Right?”

Staring at his dispassionate face, I wonder if I misheard him.

He nods, then shakes his head in contradiction. “I also said some other things, like when you marry, your priorities shift. You’re no longer first in your world. Your wife is.”

Nodding, I agree. “Right. I get that.” I swipe my damp palms down the front of my trousers.

Finally lowering his hands to his lap, he continues. “You have to care for your wife. Protect her. Put her above all else and all others.”

I sink back into the chair. I need him to understand. He needs to know how important this is to me.

“Ophelia’ll want for nothing. She’ll be under my constant protection”—and thumb—
“and when she’s not, she’ll be with those I trust. I have to be made captain.”

“Why is this so important to you? You’ve been perfectly content as our project manager, focused on our future expansion.” He waits. “And why now?”

My mouth is filled with sawdust. I want to swallow, but it would be awkwardly loud.

I clear my throat. “I have something from my past I need to revisit.”

“You know I have a strict policy about going back to our old lives,” he says, his tone void of empathy.

His wife comes from a terrible home. Her entire family lives not far from here, yet their paths never cross. Sometimes, I think he made such a hard and fast rule to protect her from them.

Only captains and the higher ranked can do such a thing, and it must be for a good reason, like a life-or-death situation.

I can’t claim to have such an excuse.

“There’s someone from my past I need to see.” Desperately. Now. “And I know that only captains and above would be given such a self-indulgent privilege.” I shake my head, filled with shame. “Which is why I need this.”

He sits back, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“I need this.” I hate the desperation as it seeps from my voice.

His dark brows lower. “Why. Now.”

“I...”No words come, and I’m left shaking my head.

From where Liam sits, I’m perfectly content to play the bitter bachelor, and for the past decade, I’ve happily stared up at the boot soles of men as they climb right over me to rise up the mafia ladder while I swing a hammer.

I can’t tell my powerful don boss why it’s different now.

Why suddenly, after being fulfilled by the odd one-night stand and my job as the family's construction manager for over ten years, I demand a wife, stability, and the title of captain.

He'll laugh in my face.

Seeing I don't have an answer for him, he moves on, making an off-the-wall comment. "We Bachmans aren't easy to love."

"Yeah, true." I exhale. "Those of us enticed by a life of crime aren't exactly running around spouting rainbows and pulling unicorns out of our asses." His eyes lock on mine, and something in his gaze makes me swallow hard. My unicorn reference was a bit too far. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound disrespectful."

He stares a beat longer and moves on. "As far as your engagement goes, there's the matter of love to consider. To become a captain, the marriage has to be a complete union."

His words hit me like a rock flung from a slingshot. What use is love in our world? Wealth. Power. Control. Those are the tools of our trade. What does love have to do with anything?

He says, "You have to love her and she, you."

My entire world comes undone, and the ground falls from beneath me. My heart sinks to the soles of my Italian leather shoes. My hands and feet go numb. I'm hot and cold all at once, and the sensation makes me lightheaded.

I mutter, "I'm afraid that's impossible."

"It's in our vows. For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and health;

to love and to cherish; until we are parted by death.” He shakes his head. “You are welcome to have a revenge marriage if you need Ophelia in order to feel things are righted with what Leah did to you. But to become captain, I won’t accept the arrangement.”

I feel the color draining from my face. I sit back, staring blankly into the fire. “I understand.”

His voice goes quiet. “I’m sorry, Haze. This is partly my fault.”

“No, it’s not. I listened to you in the past, but I didn’t hear,” I admit. “Now, I know what it takes to move up in this family.”

He shakes his head again. “I can’t believe I had this so wrong. I would never have agreed to meet with Ophelia’s family last night if I had known you had no real love for the girl.” He sighs, leaning back in his chair. “I guess I’m no better than all the women here, playing matchmaker, desperate to see you happy.”

Happy. There’s that word again. I am destined to forever remain in this emotionally stunted state of bitterness. The walls of the room are closing in on me. The air feels stale, and the fire is suddenly way too hot. I’ve got to get out of here.

I clear my throat. “Thank you. For the truth.”

He shakes his head. “I wish it’d been sooner.” I hate the sadness in his words.

We manage another few painful moments of conversation. A handshake for Liam and a farewell kiss for Emilia, and I’m out of this house and down the front steps as quickly as my feet can carry me.

I may as well cut my losses. Pack the girl up and send her back. I’ll never love

someone. And she will indeed never love me.

But all I can think of is flawless pale skin. Gleaming dark hair. Expressive blue eyes. Supple rosebud lips. I hear her breathy release as she comes against my mouth. I see her clutching the headrest on the back seat of my car. I see her sitting on the barstool in my kitchen, talking with Gian. I hear her high, tinkling laugh.

I feel her in my arms.

This obsession is dangerous. Now that I know marrying her will get me nowhere, should I keep her for revenge or myself? The best thing I can do for myself and her is to take her back home.

Tonight.

As for becoming captain... I'm broken. Unable to love. Clearly not marriage material.

This is a massive setback, but I won't give up.

But to have someone fall in love with me? It's not impossible. In fact, it's already happened. A woman loves me so hard and profoundly that they've become obsessed.

The wheels crank in the dark recesses of my mind. I think of Bianca standing in the road, her gray coat tight around her and the desperation in her face highlighted by the car's headlights. I will find a way to survive, to get what I need. Bianca loves me.

Could I, in turn, play a convincing enough role as the adoring husband?

Say my vows like an actor on a stage. Take my rightful place as captain. Make my hit.

I'm giving myself chills.

I, too, have a flair for dramatics when pushed against a wall.

Liam's questions burn in my mind, asking me why becoming captain is essential to me now.

What held me back from telling Liam the whole truth of the why and why now was that revealing the answer would make me look like a complete and total ass.

If Liam is unwilling to take a risk for me, how can I tell him the hard truth?

The person I'm so in dire need of protecting is someone I've never even met.

If I were wired differently, I'd bury my head in the sand—better yet, in Ophelia's magical pussy—and forget everything else going on in the world, but that's not me. There is only family in this world, chosen or blood, and I ride or die with family.

With one exception.

My mother.

She destroyed me as a child and made me unable to trust another woman. Without full trust, there cannot be genuine love—not real love, anyway. This is why I'm damaged goods, unlovable, and unable to love, and thus will never be made captain of this family.

Someone, please, do me a favor and cue the orchestra of tiny violins. I need a pity party. Right now.

I think of the night everything changed...

We were lying by the pool, drinking. A casual night where Liam actually let loose and laughed. Emilia poured me another whiskey. Staring into my eyes, she playfully begged, “Let me make you an online dating profile. Come on. It’ll be fun. You need to wash the Chanel of Bianca off you.” My boss’s wife blinked twice, smiled adorably, and said, “Pretty please?”

And I said yes.

Neither of us had any idea where it would lead.

Leah catfished me. Eros handed me that folder. I found out something about my old life that changed my current one.

I knew I had to go back home. And I was entirely pissed off at Leah. Why not steal the woman’s daughter who catfished me as part of my plan to become captain?

Heaving a sigh, I tell myself NOT to drag my hand through my hair. Instead, I rub the stress from the back of my neck, thinking of that navy blue file pulled together by Eros Calvani.

Eros, a fellow recruit from my initiation year, and current head of Bachman Security’s Italy branch, was the one to complete the investigation of my “catfishing incident.” God, I hate the term catfishing, but I don’t know what else to call it. Catfishing makes me feel like I’m floundering. Or that I’m a pussy.

Either way, I’m an idiot who got taken for a ride.

I asked Eros if he could keep any of the information he found to himself. There’s an extra layer of loyalty between initiates when you go through the hell we did together to prove we were worthy of joining, so of course, he had my back. If I think being called Harry is terrible, imagine all the brothers knowing I got catfished.

When he handed me the file, the cool paper smooth against my fingers, he locked eyes with me. “There’s something in here that you’ll need to sit down while you read.”

I remember staring at him, asking, “What?”

“Trust me,” he said, his eyes still focused on mine. At that moment, another brother came up to join us, and the conversation ended.

Later, when I was in the privacy and solace of my own home, I opened that file.

I found out I have a brother.

Well, a half-brother, but to me, that means everything. Growing up with a dead father and a psychotic mother, I longed for a brother. And now I have one.

And he must be protected from my mother. I can’t let her fuck him up like she did me.

This is why it’s so essential to become captain NOW. This is why, when Leah catfished me, I used the dastardly situation to my benefit, creating a revenge scheme to get a bride. This is why convincing Liam I was settled enough to become captain was so important.

I have to go home, face my mom, and save my brother.

CHAPTER 15

Ophelia

While waiting for Haze to come home, I balance the normalcy of schoolwork with the unbelievable fact that I've left my home and I'll soon be married. Gian's presence helps me stay calm and focused instead of worrying the day away, entirely overwhelmed.

Gian cut me off at my second cappuccino this afternoon. He says it will stunt my growth. He has no idea how many milligrams everyone at my school takes in daily. There's a Starbucks in the lobby of our rich kid school. If Gian's logic was valid, my classmates with daddies—the word makes me blush even thinking of it—those with their parents' limitless credit cards would all be four inches tall if caffeine stunts your growth.

Sipping the final delicious drops from my cup—so good—I rub my bleary eyes and stare at the computer screen. Would it be rude or a compliment to Gian if I licked the insides of the cup?

I settle deeper into my barstool. I've only been here a day or so, but I talk about this place like it's my home. How have I become so comfortable so fast?

I eye Gian. He's cooking pasta sauce for dinner. Apparently, it must simmer all day, and he refuses to leave his pot, telling me it takes constant stirring and love. He's babysitting his sauce from the breakfast table by the window, soaking up sunlight. He wears silver-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose while reading an old-

fashioned newspaper, one of the massive paper ones with the black ink that smudges your fingertips. We had to use one to research a paper for Current Events class last semester, and I remember having to wash my hands afterward.

My paper was about a crime family outside New York that runs the city's largest bank. Seeing Gian's newspaper makes me think of my father. I wanted to find out what had happened to him, but my family wouldn't tell me the truth.

Knowing more about my roots will make me feel connected to my father in a way that will fill this void, or whatever you call that constant feeling in my stomach. The one that tells me I don't belong. The one that keeps me from letting people in.

Living inside the walls of a branch of one of the world's most powerful crime families is the best chance I have of finding information.

I can't let this opportunity pass.

"Mr. Gian?" I say.

He looks up from his paper. "Yes, my dear?"

"I have a question for you."

"No." He shakes his head. "No more cappuccino, young one. I told you that too much caffeine is not good when you are still growing."

"It's not that," I say with a smile. "I was wondering if you know anything about a—" I hesitate to use the word mafia. "A group based out of Scotland. In the same line of work as the Bachmans."

He puts the paper down, folding it so perfectly that we may be spirit animals. He then

lays it on the table. Taking off his glasses, he folds them and tucks them into his shirt pocket.

Cautious, he eyes me. “Do you know where they are based in Scotland?”

“Edinburgh or Glasgow.” I shake my head. “I’m not sure.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, he leans back in his seat. “There are two warring groups I know of in Scotland. One is called the King’s Mafia. They originated on a small island far from the mainland. They make their money running weapons and ammunition on the water.”

Weapons, ammo, that’s not too bad. Right? Could my dad have been born on this island? Maybe he was one of the King’s.

“And the other,” I ask.

“The Hoax. Based out of Glasgow.” The way his face twists in disgust makes my heart sink into my barstool. He shakes his head. “They are not good men.”

“Oh.” I’m too scared to ask how the Hoax makes their money. What if my father was one of those bad men? Do I really want to know?

He eyes me. “Why do you ask?”

Do I tell him the truth? His face is sincere. His baked goods have loosened my tongue. “My father was in a gang in Scotland. I don’t know anything about him.”

He stands, moving over to stand across from me. He presses his palms to the countertop. “What do you know?”

I tell him the only story I have about my past. “We were living in Glasgow at the time. My mom—Leah—briefly dated an older man when she was nineteen. Boom. Here I am. When he had visitation one day, my mom says he took off, kidnapping me and running to Edinburgh. We were right outside the castle, in a group of tourists, when he realized he was being followed. A beautiful woman with a pearl necklace was crossing the road. He thrust me into her arms for safety.” I glance down at my hands, swallowing back the tightness in my throat. I’ve never shared this. With anyone. “He was shot moments later.”

Gian exhales a deep breath. “God. That’s... I don’t even know what to say.” He shakes his head.

“The woman took care of me while she searched for my next of kin and finally found my mom and grandparents who came to get me. My mom refuses to tell me the name of the woman who saved me. I think I have a vague memory of her. A big smile and long blonde hair. She was always laughing. I loved the woman’s pearl necklace; as a baby, I would always play with it while she wore it, so she called me Pearl.” That part is true because my mom gave me the necklace when I turned eighteen. “When we left, the woman gave my mom the necklace, and my mom changed my middle name to Pearl as a tribute to her.”

“That’s sweet.” He eyes me. “Edinburg Castle, you say?”

“Yes,” I say. “At the crosswalk that led to the curving road that goes up to the castle.”

“I wish I knew more.” He nods. “I’ll ask around.”

My heart lifts with hope. “You’ve already done so much for me...”

He places a warm hand over mine. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The sincerity in his voice makes tears of gratitude prick at the back of my eyes. A new email notification appears on my computer screen, saving me. It's the message I've been waiting for from my teacher, that the grade revisions have been posted. He promised if we got everything to him by three p.m., we'd have our revised grades by five.

"Grades are back, Mr. Gian." Nerves flutter in my belly as I open the school portal. Will this grade be any better than the last?

Gian moves around the island to stand behind me, looking over my shoulder. "What did you get!"

"You've got to be kidding me." I hit refresh on my computer, hoping the number on the screen would magically change. It doesn't. "All that work and only a 76!"

He puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Not bad for only one morning of work," he says. "And now the average of the two grades is 70."

"I passed!"

"Yes," he says. "You did. Nice work."

"Thanks to you!" I glance back, beaming a smile at him. "Let me see if he graded our essay yet."

"Your essay," he corrects. He squeezes my shoulder before going to the stove to check on his simmering pot of pasta sauce. "I only did a little editing. You're a good writer."

"And a dastardly speller," I say.

“Speaking of tomorrow morning, at the same time and in the same place to study for your vocabulary test?” He dips a soup spoon in the sauce, bringing it to his lips for a taste.

“Yes, please.”

“It’ll be my pleasure. It’s quiet here in the mornings. Needs more salt. Always more salt, isn’t it?” He grinds his container of pink salt over the pot. I’ve never seen pink salt before.

I think of how much time Gian’s already spent helping me. “If you’re sure I’m not getting in your way. I am known to be a little too chatty at times.”

“I grew up in a big family.” He lays eyes on me to assure me. “I enjoy your company.”

“Thanks.” Shyly, I add, “Today would have been super lonely without you.”

“Mr. Bachman will be home soon,” Gian comments.

Blood rushes to my head. I snap my computer closed. Knowing Haze’ll be walking in that door any moment fills me with anxiety. A confusing flicker of heat licks at my core. I don’t know what to expect from our first “official” evening together as—fiancées. Is that the correct term for what we are? Or is it kidnapper and kidnappee?

Husband and soon-to-be wife?

Gian hangs a kitchen towel on the oven handle to dry. He looks at me. “Is there anything you need from me before I go pack?”

“Pack?” I almost shout. I lower my voice. “You mean, you’re leaving?”

His brow knits in confusion. “Did Mr. Bachman not tell you?”

“Does he tell me anything?” I ask.

He laughs. “I leave tomorrow afternoon, but I won’t go until I study with you and make you lunch—grilled cheese again?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.” I do like that grilled cheese. It was perfectly toasted with just enough butter and the melty cheese doing that stringy thing when you pull the triangles apart. But I need to know more about why he’s going on this sudden trip. I feel my face fold into an accusatory glance. “How long will you be gone for?”

He whisks his hand through the air. “You two need your space. To get to know one another better.” He tosses a bay leaf into the pot. “You don’t need a gray-haired third wheel in your space.”

“How long, Mr. Gian?” I ask.

He tries to divert my attention, hitting my weakest spot. “I’ll leave you chocolate ganache cake for your dessert.”

“Thank you,” I say. “That sounds lovely.”

Why won’t he tell me how long he will be gone? An unpleasant thought pricks at the back of my mind, making my gaze drop to the countertop. I tap the end of a pen against the marble. “He didn’t ask you to leave, did he?”

“Hmmm?” Gian is pretending to be enthralled with his stirring. He doesn’t want to answer me.

I press on. “I mean, if he did ask you to leave to give us space, please don’t go. We can get to know one another just fine with you here,” I beg.

Finally, Gian looks up from his pot long enough to briefly make eye contact. “He didn’t ask me. Please don’t mention it to him tonight—he’s still sore about the trip. It’s just a last-minute thing that came up. Family business.”

My stomach flip-flops. I squirm on my barstool. I picture being in this house without Gian and alone with Haze.

I need my new friend for emotional support and comfort—and let’s not forget that the food has been incredible—and he’s my only hope. Selfishly, I say, “I still need to talk to my family.”

“You’ve been working hard all day. Mr. Bachman will be home soon. Why don’t you lie down a little before you have to get ready for dinner.” Finally, he looks at me for longer than a second, and there’s a mischievous twinkle in his lingering gaze.

The look in his eye is the same one Grandma gives me when I’m going to the movies, and she’s hiding a little extra pocket money in my purse for candy.

He’s going to help me! “You know, I am a little tired. That’s a good idea.” I ease up from my stool. Standing, I stretch my arms up high, yawning. “I think I will rest for a bit.”

I’m hoping for a phone.

He clicks the knob on the stove off and sets a lid on the pot. “I’m going to pack. I’ll call you when dinner is ready. This will taste even better if it sits till dinner. Be sure I take the bay leaf out before we eat.”

“Thanks, Gian,” I say.

The thought of hearing my mom’s voice sends butterflies taking off in my stomach. I neatly put my school supplies and laptop back into my backpack, heaving it over my shoulder. Eager to discover what he left for me, I prance up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Closing the bedroom door, I stow my backpack on the closet floor.

Whatever it may be, where could it be? I look around. At first glance, nothing seems out of place. There’s a desk, desk chair, bed, dresser with eight drawers, two nightstands, the bed, and the closet behind me with doors I’ve left open.

The closet seems like a good place to begin. My backpack and shoes are neatly lined on the floor. A few things I’ve unpacked are on one of the center shelves. There’s a long, high shelf over the bars for hanging clothing.

If I had something to hide, I’d go high. Standing on the balls of my feet, I stretch upward, running my fingers over the smooth wood of the empty shelf. Nothing.

I go to the desk, carefully opening and closing each drawer. They’re all empty. I pull open the top drawer of the dresser. A colorful line of neatly folded panties greets me. Lifting a corner of a stack of boy shorts, I eye the three-stranded pearl necklace that means everything to me. I reach out, touching the cool beads for comfort. This necklace is my only connection to my father. I tuck the pearls back under my undies for safekeeping.

As I close the drawer, a chime goes off, the same one that sounds whenever the house's front door opens or closes.

Someone has opened the front door. My heart hammers in my chest. My head snaps

to the closed bedroom door. Is he home already? I tiptoe over to the door and listen for his voice. I don't hear anyone. I need to be sure.

Slowly, I inch the bedroom door open.

The hair stands up on the back of my neck as I call out, "Haze? Are you home?" I hope against hope for no answer. I'm met with total silence.

The door chimes again.

"Gian?" I call out.

"Just putting my bag in the car, darling! You have at least another half hour."

"Thanks!" Closing the door, I lean against it, exhaling the breath I've been holding. I stare around the room. I have thirty minutes to find whatever he's left me and contact my family.

Time is running out.

I search the rest of the dresser drawers and nightstands. No phone. No paper. Not so much as a postage stamp.

Haze will be home soon. Defeat weighs heavy on my shoulders. Drained by the search, I flop onto the bed. Maybe I will take a "wee nap," as my Scottish grandma says.

I lie face down on the pillow, snuggling my cheek into the downy fluff. Closing my eyes, I slide my hands under the pillow. My fingertips bump into something hard and cold. Something that wasn't there this morning when I fluffed this pillow up as my final detail in making this bed.

Silly Ophelia, of course he hid something under the pillow! He told me that when he hinted at me to lie down. I can't believe I wasted so much time!

Still, victory is mine, and a huge smile beams across my face.

Kneeling on the mattress, I slide the pillow to the right to discover a small gray phone, an old one that folds in half. "Flip phone? Is that what they call them?"

Or, should I say, a burner phone—one you buy for twenty euros at a convenience store that can't be traced to any established phone number.

I learned the term from a true crime podcast Carter listened to as he drifted off to sleep the last night he spent in my bed. Carter. Can I call him, too? If he even wants to hear from me. What Haze did to him was humiliating. Do I know his number by heart? Not having my contacts from my phone sucks.

I have ten minutes left. I flip the phone open. The number keys stare up at me, begging me to remember our home landline. It takes two tries to dial correctly. My heart beats faster as the first ring comes over the line.

Then, a second ring. "Please pick up."

My skin goes clammy on the third ring. There's no time left. They have to pick up! It rings again, and I think of my grandpa, always sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee or playing solitaire with his worn deck of cards. Where is he now?

The call rings out. No one answers. I flip the phone closed. Holding the cool plastic against my chin, I stare at the patches of my quilt.

Dread begins to sink in. Are they not answering because they never made it home? Was Haze lying to me this whole time? Why should I trust him? Though he's

practically a stranger to me, he knows me better than anyone in some ways.

He's the only person I've done those things with. I entirely let go, fully embraced the climax, and lost myself in the euphoria. He's better acquainted with certain parts of my body than I am.

The phone rings. How do you silence the ringer on this thing? More importantly, how do you answer it? I flip it open. On the front, there's a small screen with no pictures, only numbers.

Caller ID?

The number displayed on the screen is not my home landline. It's a number I don't recognize. What if it's Haze? Maybe Gian told him he left me a phone, and he's testing me. Should I answer it and risk getting caught?

Or not answer it and potentially miss a call back from my family?

CHAPTER 16

Ophelia

While deciding between answering the phone and attempting to flush it down one of Haze's fancy toilets that flush with the power of a jet engine, I hear a faint voice calling out my name from my lap. "Ophelia! Ophelia! Is that you?"

I fly the phone up to my ear. "Mom, is that you?"

"Yes. It's me!" Relief floods through me to hear her voice. "Are you okay? You sound a little shaken up."

"Do I?" My voice comes out high and squeaky. I take a beat, calm down, and tell my voice to chill. "I didn't recognize the number."

"I saw the missed call on the landline and called you back from my cell. I wanted a little privacy from the grandparents," she laughs. "You know I wouldn't be able to get a word in if they knew you were on the phone."

I can picture Grandpa and Grandma reaching for one another, taking the phone out of one another's hands as they try to get my attention. Then, I picture an angry Haze storming through the bedroom door to find me on the phone. I have to make this quick.

"Mom, I only have a minute?—"

Before I can say another word, her words come out fast and furious. “Baby, I need you to know I did NOT steal that money. I don’t even have a dating profile! But I’m not innocent. I know who did, and I allowed it to happen?—”

“What? Are you serious?” My hand goes to my forehead as I gape at the quilt, her words setting in. How does she even know I know about all that?

“My worry for your education and my desire for you to finish at the same school you started so close to graduation clouded my judgment.” My mom exhales a deep breath, then makes her confession. “I let it happen. I accepted the money. I paid your tuition.”

“I don’t understand...” My heart is in my throat. “How did this happen? Who stole the money?”

She waits too long and says, “I can’t say.”

“Mom, you have to tell me?—”

“I don’t know. Honestly.” I believe her. Still, she needs to help me figure this out. “Mom, you have to find out who did this. Can you—I don’t know, call the dating site? Then try to get in somehow? Maybe you can call the company and tell them you lost your login?”

“I’ll try.” She redirects the conversation. “We’ve been very fortunate. Instead of repercussions, the Bachmans have been so generous as to forgive us and grant you this trip to study abroad.”

I play it cool. “Is that what the dinner you were invited to was about?”

“Yes, the one at the Villa. We met with Liam Bachman that night. He said we didn’t

have to tell you about what we had stolen, but I saw that look on your face in the kitchen the other morning when I told you tuition had been paid. You knew something was up, and you were right.”

“Yeah, that was weird. We went from losing the scholarship to paying in full.”

She sighs, and the sound makes me picture her sitting on her bed, a world away from me, shaking her head as she says, “I don’t like keeping things from you.”

So, at the dinner, my family was told a massive lie about my whereabouts and called out for their theft. They have no idea how lucky they were to make it out alive.

Lucky for whoever did steal that money, Haze had something he wanted in return.

I keep up the ruse, asking questions. “They told you they knew you took the money?”

“Yes, at the dinner. Liam was lovely. And the Villa—it’s gorgeous! You have to see it one day. We had appetizers and wine and a fabulous conversation, but then we all sat down for dinner, and Liam got this serious tone and dropped the bomb. He looked around the table and said that someone from our family had accessed Harrison Bachman’s bank account and withdrew cash.”

“He did?”

“Yes! My heart was racing, and I was afraid the police would come. After he forgave us, I thought I would sink into their Persian carpet right then and DIE! I wanted to run from the room, but he moved on without asking questions. Liam said the tuition payment we made with Haze’s money would take care of your classes, and the Bachman family scholarship would pay off all costs of your living and travel, along with spending bonuses.”

I want to ask her why they would give me a trip if we stole from them. It doesn't make sense—the powerful, dangerous Bachmans. If you steal from them, they will have their revenge. If Mom didn't create that dating profile, catfish, and rob Haze, then who did?

I want to tell her the truth: Her daughter is being held captive and will be married off to make up for their theft. However, I don't dare risk telling them the truth. They could do something foolish in retaliation, and I won't do anything to endanger them.

“They said all was forgiven, and when they were looking into the internet address of the user as they traced the dating profile, they did a little snooping on you and saw that you were a scholarship student and perfect for their program. Figuring we must be desperate to steal from them, they turned the other cheek and picked you!”

“So that's how I got this amazing opportunity.” My voice is flat.

Mom's too happy with my traveling to pick up on my tone. “I can't believe we're in different time zones when we've never been in separate towns. What's the difference? An hour?”

Crap. I have no idea. And there's no Google search on this phone. “Umm...”

She moves on. “Let's see, I'm checking your itinerary. Grandma posted it on the front of the fridge the second we got home from the Bachmans. You are currently in your hotel in London, right?”

I hate lying.

I'm not in a hotel room. I'm in the guest bedroom of a dangerous man who put a vibrating plug in my ass last night—a man who is going to make me his wife.

Because my mother let someone steal his money.

“London,” I say. “Mmm.”

She takes my mmm as a yes. Her voice is filled with excitement. “You’ll be sightseeing tomorrow with other students on the tour of Oxford. Is this your hotel room phone number? I know they said your cell may not work well over there.”

I laugh, knowing that a white lie about cell coverage was all it took for my tech-challenged family to accept that I’m not calling from my phone. I honestly have no idea how they’re running the television without me.

Mom says, “I’ll save this number as a contact?—”

“Don’t save this number—” I quickly think of a non-lie truth. “We’ve been told we won’t get much phone time.”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to be spending time on the phone anyway. You need to be out there being young, having fun, trying new things, kissing boys, having all the experiences I never got to. Live it up!”

I hate when she says stuff like that. The mom-to-daughter translation is processing in three... two... one...

“I need to live vicariously through you because I got pregnant with you by your father when I was young and single and free and had my whole life ahead of me, and the last thing I wanted was to be tied down by a baby (you) and a man (your father) that I didn’t love.”

What if I loved my father? Does she ever think about that? The only thing I know is that he had me clutched to his chest, holding me tight in his arms moments before he

was killed.

She goes on, excited for my fake adventures. “Take every opportunity they give you. See as much of the world as you can.”

My heart sinks. I don’t even desire to travel. I’m a homebody. I barely leave my circle of school, work, small town for the movies and shops, and home.

A place like the Villa suits me. It is self-contained and equipped for all my needs, and it has the most beautiful setting I’ve ever seen. I glance out the window, seeing the snow-capped mountains behind the lake.

I'd never want to leave if I came here under other circumstances.

And this room he prepared for me. I look around at the luxury. It’s so beautiful.

A wee well of loyalty for Haze springs up in me. Someone humiliated him and stole a ton of money. I don’t let her off this easy. I want the truth. “If you didn’t scam Haze, who did? And where is the rest of the money?” I ask.

Haze said we owed ten times that.

“The rest of it?” she says. Her tone is straightforward and honest. She has no idea how much was stolen. “I don’t know what you mean. I was only given the tuition payment.”

Not only did my mom NOT make the profile, but she won’t tell me who did, who stole the money, and whoever stole it didn’t tell her how much they took. There’s no time to investigate further.

I ask my last pressing question. “Mom, have you seen Carter around?”

“Carter? Not since I last saw him sneaking out your bedroom window at six a.m. the day I took you for the IUD. Speaking of, please, use protection! There could be all kinds of different STDs you could be exposed to while traveling.”

“Gross, Mom.” I’ve never told her I’m still a virgin. Heat flashes over my face, thinking I won’t be for much longer, and she had a hand in putting me in this predicament. “I don’t think you need to worry about that—” The bell chimes, cutting off my words. My heart pounds. He’s home. “Mom, I’ve got to go!”

“Go! Go! Have the best time ever?—”

I snap the phone closed. I’ve never hung up on my mom, but I had no choice. I couldn’t risk speaking out loud. Where do I hide the phone? There’s no time to silence it, and I’m sure Mom will call again. He can’t hear it ring or know I have it.

I still wear the gray hoodie I put on this morning. I tear it off, wrap the phone inside, and then run to the closet. I unzip my backpack, burying the sweatshirt inside. Eyeing my green jacket hanging in front of me, I tear it off the hanger, covering the backpack with it for good measure.

Hoping this will silence the phone, I still worry about what would happen if my mom called back.

What do I do? Where do I go? I’m flushed and out of breath. I straighten the white tee I wear. Gather my loose hair and smooth it over one shoulder. I tiptoe to the bed, burying my face in the pillow. I try to calm my breath as I listen for footsteps on the stairs.

The footsteps of my husband-to-be.

A knot forms a pit of ice in my stomach, thinking of my mom’s dreams for me to

travel and “kiss lots of boys.” There’s only one person I want to kiss, and he’s a full-grown man. She will be so disappointed when she finds out her eighteen-year-old daughter is married. It will break her heart when she learns it’s to a mafia man like my father.

A man she clearly hated.

I faintly hear Haze’s deep voice as he calls out for Gian.

A few moments later, I hear his footsteps jogging up the stairs. My door is thrown open. I debate pretending to sleep, but when he speaks, his voice is filled with so much emotion my attention instantly goes to him.

He stands in the doorway, staring at me, worry in his brown eyes. “Gian is missing. He’s not here.”

“Did you check his room?” I sit up, leaning on my elbow. My hair brushes over my bare arm. “He might still be packing.”

“Packing for what?”

“To go on a trip to visit his family. He said not to mention it to you because you were still upset about it.” As I speak, I realize I’m doing precisely what Gian told me not to.

“He never mentioned a trip to me.” He looks distraught, raking his hand through his dark curls.

I stand up from the bed, going to him. “He didn’t?”

“No.” He’s shaking his head. “Ophelia, he doesn’t have a family to visit.”

CHAPTER 17

Haze

How is it that being in the same room with her simultaneously slows my pulse and makes my heart beat faster?

I stand in the doorway momentarily, absorbing her loveliness, before telling her, “Ophelia, he doesn’t have a family to visit.”

She blinks. Twice. A beautiful doe in the headlights of my gaze. “Where has he gone, then?”

“I have no idea. Gian hasn’t taken any of our cars,” I say. “He’s taken his old clunker. And he left his staff watch on the kitchen counter. He doesn’t want us tracking him.”

“He said he wasn’t going till tomorrow afternoon. He was going to help me with schoolwork in the morning.” She looks down, thinking, chewing at her bottom lip like she does. “I wonder why he lied to me?”

“It’s not like him. He’s never done anything like this before.” I pace her bedroom floor. “I don’t understand why he would do this. As soon as I came home and couldn’t find him, I called the head of our security. Eros is scanning camera footage now but, as of yet, hasn’t found anything.”

Seeing my state, she tries to calm me. “Come, sit down. We’ll figure this out.” She goes to the cushy armchair next to the desk, one I had Charlie buy for the room.

“You’re wearing lines in the carpet. Which, you really shouldn’t be wearing shoes on.”

Sitting across from her, I sink onto the corner of her neatly made bed, eyeing her. “No one tells a man to remove his shoes in his house.”

“And no one wears shoes on my lovely carpet.” She eyes me back. Something in her gaze makes me break our eye contact.

How can I argue when she’s caring for the things I’ve bought her?

I concede, slipping one shoe off and then the other, thinking of how Gian would get a kick out of watching this exchange. Thinking of him makes that strange gnawing feeling creep up from my gut. He’s never left like this before.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Why did he leave? Tell me everything that happened today and everything he said.”

She goes through their day, doing her best to relay the information. As she speaks, I ask a few questions and gather some clarification. None of this makes sense. Gian would have told me if he was leaving for an above-board reason. I stare down at the plush carpeting and my mismatched socks.

I was so out of it this morning that I guess I couldn’t tell stripes from solids—no wonder I’m not captain material.

What a day.

She ends with, “He said we needed to take time to get to know one another and that he would be in the way. I asked him to stay.”

“He left to give us some space...” I mull over the idea.

It does sound like something Gian would do.

I know he wants nothing more than this wild, impossible thing between her and me to work out. He’s a romantic at heart. What Italian isn’t? My blood pressure is up after the failed meeting. I’m overthinking again. Gian just buggered off to give us some space. Nothing more.

I run a hand through my hair. “It sounds like him. He should have told me, though.” My eyes lock with hers. “I don’t like sneaking around. I don’t like lies.”

“You don’t like lies?” She scoffs, defending a fast and fierce friendship with Gian. “Lies like bringing my family to the Villa so someone could tell them I was studying abroad. Or sneaking around, like breaking into people’s houses? Pretty sure you snuck into my bedroom and threw my boyfriend out the window.”

Ignoring her accusation, I hang on to a word that made my stomach clench when she said it. It turns my mind off Gian, and it tastes terrible in my mouth as it comes out.

“Boyfriend?” Is that jealousy or just pure hatred oozing from my tone?

She curls up in the chair, tucking her feet under her like a sweet little kitty cat. She’s dressed in a simple white T-shirt and black lounge pants. She does not wear makeup, and her hair hangs loosely around her face.

She couldn’t be more breathtaking.

“What’s so bad about saying Carter was my boyfriend?” She’s taking the heat off Gian, protecting him by changing the subject.

I'm clever enough to see past her plan. I'm too mature to take the bait.

"I'd think he'd be brave enough to knock on your front door and show his face to your family. Maybe even take you out in the daylight and show you off like you deserve." Okay, maybe I'm not as mature as I wish I were. That, or I'm regressing. "I think a real," I use air quotes around the dastardly word, "BOYFRIEND wouldn't ask you to leave your window unlocked."

She looks away. "You don't know anything about it."

Unfortunately for her, I was a teenage boy a million years ago. I know how their minds work. And the way Carter treated her was not how you treat your girlfriend.

I lay the truth on her.

"Let me guess. He gives you a high five or a fist bump at school instead of a kiss. He calls you his bestie, not his girlfriend. And the only time he shows you affection is in the privacy of your bedroom." I stare at her, the truth written all over those rosy cheeks. "Am I right?"

"So, he wasn't my boyfriend, per se."

"Whoever is worthy of being with you will show you off like the gem you are."

"That's nice of you to say..." My words of truth soften her for a moment. Then, stubborn pride wells in her, and she says, "Still, I don't think you have too much room to talk bad about another man?—"

I stop her with a curt, "Boy. Carter is a boy. Not a man."

"Okay, let me say, don't talk bad about a boy or a man when you're the one holding

an eighteen-year-old girl hostage.” Untucking her legs from under her, she crosses her arms over her chest, ready for battle.

“You can leave at any time,” I say.

She scoffs a laugh. “Really? Just walk right out the door?”

While walking home tonight, I decided to come up here, tell her to pack, and drive her back home. Then I saw her beautiful face—makeup-free and looking the same as when I first saw her. All my determination to let her go dissipated with one look into her blue eyes.

I want her so badly.

She unfolds her arms. Tracing the seam of her sweatpants up the side of her thigh with her fingertip, she whispers, “If I leave, if I don’t give you what you want, you’ll hurt my family.”

Hurt them? Hell—Liam fed them Wagyu steaks. They weren’t even poisoned.

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t hurt them. I would need to report the theft. Let’s see...a hundred thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money. It might be a felony charge. How much time behind bars do you think your mom would get?”

She doesn’t say anything.

I’m being childish, but I won’t let her go, so I continue, saying, “The Italian courts are cracking down on online theft right now.”

“Is that so?” She narrows her eyes at me. “Why do you need a wife so badly, anyway? You don’t seem like the marrying type.”

Her words make me bristle. “That’s my business.” I think of my dastardly meeting this morning. I stop myself from running my hand frustratedly through my hair again. “Though that plan might be on hold for the moment.”

Her eyes widen. She leans forward. “Are you saying the wedding is off?”

“I said, on hold.”

Eyeing me, she says, “On hold. As in I can go home?”

I stare at her beautiful face and full lips, both begging to be kissed by me. My voice is tight. “You’re staying put.”

Her blue eyes glitter, teasing almost. “But you said it yourself. The plan is on hold.”

“Did I?” I’m barely registering the conversation. All I hear is the soft, sexy intonation of her voice. All I see are those full lips of hers moving as she talks, begging to be kissed.

“You did.” Instead, she speaks lightly, almost teasingly.

“You don’t seem to be trying too hard to get out of here.”

“I can’t go anywhere if I’m supposed to be studying abroad, can I?” she says.

There’s something in her expression I can’t quite read. I’d think she’d be clawing down the walls, fighting to escape, or at least having more force behind her words. She’s not. She’s not even jumping on my words about putting the wedding on hold, demanding it to be so.

She’s not running from the room. She’s not running from me.

She leans closer in her chair. She really shouldn't encourage me. An urge warms deep in my belly, increasing in heat as it flows through my body. Somehow every shitty thing that happened today suddenly means nothing. Liam has no faith in me. Gian has abandoned me.

The only thing I care about is sitting in front of me. Her. Desire grows strong enough to take my breath away. My chest feels tight. She makes me forget my shitty day, my unaccounted-for house manager. She makes me forget everything but her.

I don't need her love. I only need her. I have to have her.

Now.

"You don't need me anymore," she whispers.

"You're wrong." I stand from the bed. "I need you." I move closer. Even closer. I'm towering over her now. "I need you. Badly."

Steeling her nerves, she doesn't inch away. Staying seated, she forces herself to stare up at me. I reach out, stroking her face. My light touch makes her breath come faster. Her words come out in a whisper as she says, "What could a big bad man like you possibly need with a little girl like me?"

God damn.

My body was already humming with arousal, but her words ignite a fiery explosion in my veins. Every nerve ending ignites with electricity, sending sparks of desire shooting through me. I am consumed by a primal hunger, driven wild by my obsession with her.

Leaning down, I scoop her in my arms, holding her against my chest.

If I were a decent man, I'd hate myself as I touch her, this innocent, naive young woman. She's perfect, lovely, and sweet, with just the right amount of bite.

And here I am, loveless and ruined, ready to destroy her. I know her first time should be tender and loving, shared with someone who can give her his heart.

What can I give her but my body? And, it turns out, my mind, 'cause she's never further than a centimeter from my thoughts. With a cold, calculating ease, I lay her on the bed and begin to explore her body. A predator examining my prey. "Which delicious bits shall I nibble on first?"

She eases a breath as I nip along the curve of her neck. My appetite grows, and I suck at her delicate skin, eliciting a moan from her lips, hunger welling in my belly.

"I need more." Running the tip of my tongue along her collarbone, I trace my way up her neck till I find her earlobe and capture it between my teeth. I take another taste, kissing her ear and murmuring against her. "You taste beautiful."

She melts underneath me. I feel her surrender, her submission, as she lets me grasp her breast, my touch possessive and rough. I squeeze her curve, finding her nipple, and I pinch it between my finger and thumb till she cries out in pain.

Then I'm there, my lips on hers, taking her cries onto my tongue. I swipe mine against hers, tasting, exploring, and owning her. I barely know the girl, yet I know exactly how to manipulate her body, how to touch her, so she wants nothing more than to give in to me.

I can't let go of her. I don't know how I'll get to my end goal, but now, with my mouth on hers, I'm determined to arrive there with Ophelia in my arms.

I move lower, pushing her white tee up over her breasts. She wears no bra, her

beautiful breasts free and bare and warm in my hands. My kiss moves to her nipple, her body arching as I suck and taste.

She whimpers as I move lower, kissing her belly. My five-o-clock shadow tickles her, and she jerks, giggling nervously as I brush my jawline against her again. When she realizes where I'm going, she attempts to resist, as before.

Kneeling over her, I grab the waistband of her pants. "You should know by now I'll always get what I want." I tug them over her hips and down her legs, taking them from her body and flinging them onto the floor.

I stare down at her, leaving the tee shirt twisted up above her breasts, the rest of her naked body bared to me. "No panties. No bra. You are officially declared the sexiest creature on this earth."

No longer able to hold back, I bury my face in the soft, warm, musky heaven between her thighs. Her legs tense, but it's easy enough to part them, so I can lick and nibble her already swollen clit. Addicted to her taste, I lap at her arousal, tonguing her tight entrance.

She grabs my hair. I love the feel of her fingertips running over my head. Fiery electric pulses dance over my skin where she touches me.

Realizing I'll soon have my cock buried where my tongue is, I almost come in my pants. I rub myself against the bed, finding friction to relieve some of the pulsing need aching there. I'll be the first man to ever have my cock in her perfect pussy.

I can barely think as I glorify the virgin I'll soon take ownership of. The pleasure builds in her quickly, and before I'm done, she's curling around me, crying out in what sounds like startled moans—she's shocked and overwhelmed by me. It's clear she's never had a man with my experience dedicated to worshiping her, a body that

was made to be celebrated, exhausted.

She struggles to catch her breath as she comes, panting as she says my name. An angel sings her praise: “Haze. Oh my god! Haze!”

Her body strains against me. I hold her hips tight, keeping my mouth tight against her so I can draw every last ounce of honey from her. Only when I’m fulfilled do I release her. She falls against the bed, boneless and slack.

I crawl my way back to her, kissing her fully. “See how good you taste? I’m addicted to you.” She kisses me back, hesitant at first, but then I move my hand between her wet thighs and play with her as our tongues tangle together.

I rest my weight against her as I finger her, thrusting my tongue further into her mouth at the same pace I’m stroking inside her with my pressed-together fingers. She kisses me back, hungry and in need. I cup the back of her head with my free hand, holding her close as I bring another orgasm to her trembling body.

She cries into my mouth. I kiss the climax away, holding her as she slowly turns to liquid in my arms. Before drawing my fingers from her, I stroke her once more, whispering against her ear, “I can’t wait to fuck this tight little hole.”

Her once pliable body goes rigid. She snaps her head back from mine. There are daggers in her eyes.

Page 18

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CHAPTER 18

Ophelia

Heaven's gates were opened by his fingers dancing on me. He made me come. Hard. I saw stars. As quickly as he brought euphoria with his hands, he shatters it with his hurtful words.

"I can't wait to fuck this tight little hole," he says.

How could someone who made me feel so alive also be the one to bring me crashing back down and feeling used? Does he only see me as a tight hole to be used for his pleasure? I had never let anyone get this close to me, but now I question if I ever should have.

My blurred vision clears, and I push him away, my anger building. "How dare you talk to me like that."

He tries to backtrack, but the damage is done. "I didn't mean it like that. It was just... talk." Wrong. He doesn't see me as a person but as just another conquest.

He knows I'm a virgin, not an experienced woman who likes this kind of thing, and his words cut deep.

"It wasn't sexy or alluring; it was degrading," I say. "I'm not one of your experienced one-night-stand older women looking for a good time."

He looks at me wide-eyed. “What? How did I make you feel that way?” His face shows genuine shock.

I feel icky. Unsure of myself. Am I being too much? Too sensitive? Too... young?

This was not how I envisioned my first time being with someone.

“This isn’t about me. At all. This is about you and your... you know what—” I get up to leave, but he stops me.

Quickly he moves in, scooping my face into his hands. He stares deep into my eyes. “I apologize. I shouldn’t have said that to you.” As he speaks, he’s angling his body over mine, his legs maneuver against mine, and the head of his cock is finding its way between my legs.

I go from hating him to wanting him in a few breaths.

Desire builds back up inside me so fast that blood rushes to my head. I feel dizzy. The most fight I can muster is a weak “Okay.” Self-loathing washes over me for my weakness.

My body wants him, and she’s winning the fight.

“Let me make you feel good, baby. I want to show you things you’ve never experienced before. You’re so beautiful, so sexy. I lost my mind momentarily because I want you so badly.” His eyes never waver from mine as he presses the head of his cock to my entrance. The possessive hunger flashing in his dark irises is enough to make me forgive him.

Almost.

He stares at me. “Can I keep going?”

Can he?

I’ve never been wanted like this.

It feels good. Too good.

Am I in that stupid stupor I’ve seen other girls my age succumb to? The “believe anything he says” phase? Letting his smooth words woo me like a siren’s call, letting him in places a man like him should never be.

I used to laugh at girls who let their hormones win out over their brain cells. I felt superior, at least knowing I was using Carter as much as he used me. But with Haze, it’s different.

Everything’s different. My entire world has changed.

And I’m completely out of control, like now, when that heady look of need fills his gaze as he stares at me.

It’s too much. I have to look away.

He captures my chin in his hand, forcing me to make eye contact with him. “You’re better than me,” he says, meaning every word. “You deserve better than me.”

And my head has lost to my heart.

Unsure if I’ve made the wrong decision, I let him in.

Instead of the lingering doubt, I focus on the feeling of him against me. I love running

my fingers through the hair at the back of his head, and I do that now, scratching my fingernails lightly over him for comfort. I've felt his fingers inside me, but this is different.

Immense. Meaningful.

Kinda like my emotions right now.

He moves against me. "You deserve better, but if you let me try, I'll be better." He kisses me lightly on the forehead and the cheek. "For you."

He feels soft and firm, warm and slippery against me, yet I burn as he pushes, the head of his cock entering me. He moves slowly, giving me time to adjust as I process this new sensation of being stretched and filled.

How is having his cock inside me so much more vulnerable than his fingers? That's not even the right word. I rack my mind, trying to put a name to this swirl of immense feelings I'm experiencing as he enters me.

But now he's going deeper, and rational thoughts disappear. Relentlessly, he thrusts inside me. Conflicting emotions consume me. I want to give in to the primal desire coursing through my veins. Yet my body fights against this unfamiliar invasion, this new feeling balancing on the edge of pain and pleasure, causing sharp stabs of pain and discomfort.

My mind is a battlefield, struggling to comprehend the overwhelming emotions of vulnerability and submission as every inch of him stretches and tears at me, filling me and causing foreign sensations.

The burning makes tears sting at the back of my eyes as I try to adjust to the intrusion.

His lips are hot as they kiss my cheek and ear, fluttering my hair with his breath. He slides his hand under my ass, cupping my curves, his fingertips squeezing me as he presses his thighs against mine, burying himself deeper inside of me.

“Are you okay,” he asks.

I want to answer him. I do. I try to come up with the words, but there are none worthy of what’s happening to my body.

Instead, I moan, closing my eyes and turning my head to direct his hot kisses, wanting them to trail down the side of my neck. He takes the bait, and his lips and teeth tease my sensitive skin, sending tingles all over my body as he clutches my ass tighter.

The fingertips of the hand that’s clutching my ass cheek move in closer, exploring the space between my cheeks. He circles my rosebud with a finger, pushing it in just to the first knuckle as he starts moving, each thrust sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

Despite it all, he persists with slow and deliberate movements until he's fully engulfed inside of me. My nails dig into his back as I writhe beneath him, lost and overwhelmed.

I’m tight, too full, burning as I stretch to take him, but despite the discomfort, there's an undeniable wet wall of pleasure building inside me. As he picks up speed and intensity, the pleasure becomes all-consuming, threatening to overwhelm my senses, threatening to overpower the pain. His finger in my ass only adds to the confusing satisfaction.

He brushes the hair back from my face and flutters soft kisses over my cheeks, lips, and forehead. “How are you?” Frantically, I shake my head, unable to form words.

My tongue is numb, and my mind is gone.

The initial pain fades into a dull ache as waves of intense pleasure crash over me. Lost in a feverish daze, I feel myself move past the wall of anxiety and uncertainty.

He moves faster now. My muscles clench and tense around him, the need consuming me whole. His lips take mine in a fierce kiss, his tongue dominating every inch of my mouth as he thrusts back and forth, plunging deeper and deeper inside me. My pleasure intensifies with each of his calculated movements, causing friction and heat like a caveman rubbing two sticks together to create enough heat for a fire.

Sparks fly through me as the blaze builds. The friction becomes all-encompassing, almost unbearable, creating a primal heatwave that pushes me to the brink of sanity.

He suddenly pulls out completely.

I'm empty, aching, my muscles clenching for him in his absence. Something I was so scared of...having him inside me for the first time...the pain of taking him for the first time...are now very distant memories.

The only thing that exists is the fact that his cock is not inside me.

My head snaps back forward. "What? No! Where did you go!"

He stares down at me like he's gazing at a work of art. The tip of his tongue runs over his bottom lip as he smooths his hand over my breasts, drawing my nipples even tighter till they're almost painful in their excitement.

"I need you," I whimper in protest, ready to beg.

His smoldering eyes lock on mine. Eye contact with him alone makes me wetter.

Then, his deep, smooth voice tells me, “I want more of you. I want to feel you deeper.”

Deeper? Is that possible? Before I can protest, he flips me onto my stomach.

My stomach rests on the mattress, my face falling to the pillow. Grabbing my hips, he pulls them up and back, dragging me onto my knees. I feel his hard, ready cock brush my inner thighs.

“Ah... mmm.” I give a deep moan, pushing my hips back toward him, begging with my body. He strokes my ass with his hand as he nuzzles the head of his cock against my entrance. I beg, “Please.”

“Baby. Give me time. I want to worship every inch of you.” He bends down, laying against me. I feel the heat and the pressure of his firm, smooth chest against my back.

As he folds, his cock pushes harder against my pussy, making me whisper-plead with a soft murmur. “Haze.”

His lips brush over my shoulder. “I’ll be deep inside you soon, but first, I want to hear something from your pretty lips.”

“Wh—what?” I’ll tell him anything. I need him back inside me. Now.

“Tell me one thing, baby.” His warm, broad hands smooth down my back, from my neck to my waist, as he drags himself back up to a kneeling position behind me. His palms are rough as he cups them around my hips. Calloused from a day of work, nothing like a soft billionaire’s should be. I almost want to ask him what he’s been up to today to make his hands have this incredibly sexy feel, but even I can sense now is not the time.

“You feel so fucking good. How do you look this incredible from every angle?” Rough skin caresses my hips, the head of his cock teasing my entrance, pushing in only enough to make me more desperate.

“Please...” Why won’t he put the damn thing in me? How do I ask for what I want? My body begs, but the words don’t come.

Then he spanks my ass, the sharp pain making me cry out.

He says, “Who’s your daddy?”

The taboo words burn through me. How have I gotten myself into this? I go from leaving my bedroom window open a couple of nights a week for cuddles to having a full-grown man teasing to get inside me and demanding to know who my daddy is.

He spanks me again, fire and light bright against my skin. I gasp out, “What? What do you want?”

“If you want me inside you,” he smooths his rough palm over my spanked ass, “tell me, now. Who’s your daddy, baby?”

“Oh my god. You are. You are, Haze.”

“There you go, baby. That’s right.” And I get my reward. Yanking my hips back against his, he thrusts the head of his cock past the tight muscles of my entrance, making my skin stretch and burn in the best way.

“You are, Haze,” I breathe out, relieved.

“Damn. Hearing those pretty words, you almost made me come.” He pushes deeper. I moan as he enters me. This time, my body is in tune with his, and it’s less painful

than the first time he entered me.

His hands glide smoothly over my skin, leaving fiery lines in their wake. I can't bring myself to do anything but take him as he strokes and kneads every inch of me, claiming ownership of my flesh with calloused hands. From this new angle, he hits all the right spots inside of me; new sensations send sparks of pleasure coursing through my body. I lose myself in him, unable to do anything except let him take me all the way.

When I think I'm reaching the peak of pleasure, his hand finds its way to my clit, rubbing circles on it with expert precision. The added stimulation pushes me over the edge, and my body explodes into a powerful orgasm that rocks through every nerve ending.

The orgasm is deeper than anything I've felt. It's coming not only from the outside, where his talented hand teases my clit, but it's from the inside, where his cock rhythmically makes my body sing.

My back arches as waves of pleasure crash over me. I may implode. I want to beg him to stop. I want him to never stop. He continues to thrust into me from behind while teasing my clit until I'm writhing underneath him in euphoric agony.

Finally, unable to hold back any longer, he releases with a low growl deep inside of me. I can feel him pulsing and twitching inside me as he fills me up with wet heat, too much, spilling over and running down my inner thighs.

I can't believe I'm no longer a virgin. Would my mother be proud? She bought me an IUD. She told me to kiss a lot of boys. Somehow, I think losing my virginity to a man almost twice my age the night after he abducted me isn't what she had in mind.

Blowing out the candles on my cake when I turned eighteen, I felt no closer to

entering the real world. But this primal, fiery encounter has shattered any doubts about my entering adulthood. I am a woman in every sense of the word now, my body ablaze with desire and satisfaction.

He collapses against me and rolls us to the bed, grinning. He looks as fulfilled as I feel. All he can say as he quietly brushes my hair back from my face is, “Damn.”

A placid grin spreads over my face. I tilt my face up to him, wanting to celebrate this milestone with a kiss.

He takes my face in his hands, kissing me deeply. He nuzzles his cheek against mine. Then he whispers hotly in my ear. “Now that I’ve had you, there’s only one thing left to do with you.”

Now that I’ve had you?

The words hit wrong.

The trust we had worked so hard to build now hangs by a thread. In his presence, I feel alluring, foolish, and unsure of where our interactions will lead. A heartbeat ago, I was basking in my self-assuredness and contentment. His words make me feel cheap and disposable, like a plastic pawn in a chess game. Once again, doubt invades my mind.

The fear of my ruin grows stronger.

His words make something burn bright inside me, and finally, I have the will to do what I should have done when he first brought me here.

Fight back.

Tearing myself from the lock of his warm embrace, I sit up, staring daggers down at him. “Now that you’ve had me? You mean now that I’ve let you have me.”

“That’s what I said,” he lies.

“Only one thing left to do with me?” I demand. It sounds like he’s planning on taking me out like a bin of trash. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that...” Satisfaction fills me as the cocky smile drops from his lips. Is that—regret on his face? Does he feel bad? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” He goes from a lethal shark to a soft bunny, shaking his head at himself. “I’m fucking this up every way from Sunday.” He softly traces a fingertip up and down my bare arm. “I just meant that I may have some plans for you.”

I’m so confused. I need space. I untangle myself from his arms.

He stares up at me. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom,” I say, grabbing my rumpled quilt and pulling it around my body. It feels silly to cover myself up after what we’ve just done, but I don’t like feeling exposed to him after what he’s said to me. “I need a shower.”

As I go to leave, he grabs an end of my trailing quilt, tugging me back to him for a quick peck. “Don’t be long.”

His sweet action is almost enough to make me stay. His sweetness is at war with his entitlement, confusing my head and heart. I rush to the bathroom, exhaling as I close the door. To my surprise, I’m sore under the hot, steamy water as I gently wash him away from me.

I can't help but question if it will all come crashing down. Despite this inner turmoil,

a part of me wants to stay and see what could possibly arise from this touch-and-go inferno between us.

Wrapped tightly in a fluffy towel, I return to the room to dress. He's not here. My bed is perfectly made, the feather duvet tucked tight around the corners. Obviously, I like that he's made my bed with care. It's kind that he's given me privacy to dress.

Still, my stomach does a little twist. I'm disappointed that he left. Like, even kinda upset.

You take my virginity, then run the first chance you get?

The thoughts are not rational. This is so not like me. I'm not one of those girls who creates drama where there is none. Shaking my head at myself, I go for the comfort of my favorite gray sweatpants, a tee, and a hoodie. I open the top drawer for panties.

Instead, I find my necklace.

The best part of turning eighteen was being gifted these pearls. I love having something connected to my past; it makes me feel stronger. I lift them from the drawer, holding them to my face.

The cool beads rest against my skin. I close my eyes, trying to remember the woman who once wore them. I want to meet her, see her face, and hear her laugh. I want her to tell me the story of that day.

The real one.

Because I feel I'm not getting anything close to the truth out of my family.

I think of my father. If I close my eyes tight and conjure up the scent of cedarwood in

my mind, I can feel him. His face is a hazy mask of images I've conjured up over the years, but deep within my chest, I feel him holding me. I feel his love. The story Mom tells about him kidnapping me and taking me away—it can't coexist with the way I remember him, so I push it away.

I fool myself into thinking they've gotten it all wrong.

Why would they keep every name, every photo, every scrap of everything away from me if they were telling me the truth?

I carefully tuck the necklace back in the drawer, hidden under cotton underthings. I don't know why I took it off in the first place or when I'll wear it again but now, I leave it where it is. I grab a pair of panties.

On second thought...

Holding the soft cotton garment between my fingers, I remember lying on the bed, naked, my shirt pushed up over my breasts, my body exposed. How he stood over me, taking me in with those dark eyes filled with nothing but desire. I think of his words, how they warmed something inside me and made me feel wanted.

No panties. No bra. You are officially declared the sexiest creature on this earth.

I leave the panties in the drawer, untouched, forgotten, and go without.

There I go again, doing something to please him.

I shut the drawer a wee bit too hard in my frustration. I try to be mature and tell myself that any young woman in this situation would be hit with a tsunami of conflicting emotions—especially one who doesn't let many people in.

Honestly, other than family, I don't let anyone in.

Why do I guard myself with an iron sword and mile-high gates? Maybe it's because of my unresolved dad issues or because I constantly feel like an imposter at the prestigious school where I was on a scholarship.

Even with Carter, I only let him in my window.

I never let him in my heart.

So why Haze? Why now? I've let him "in" in many ways, haven't I? The thought makes my heart pound harder and stirs an aching between my thighs.

Even in the chaos of this situation, I somehow feel safe with him even though I know the man could ruin a girl like me. A great white shark devouring his trusting little prey. And here I am, the naive wee one only wanting to let him swallow me whole.

I dress quickly, brushing and drying my hair until it gleams like water down my back. There really is a difference between drugstore shampoo and the expensive stuff they have here.

A soft knock draws my attention to the door. "Come in."

The opening door reveals him looking like a god, dressed in a simple black V-neck sweater and jeans. He's somehow holding two bowls of pasta in one arm like a waiter, and the smell filling the air is incredible. "You seemed like you needed some space to breathe. I tried to stay away as long as I could. Sorry, but this is all the time I could take." Then he smiles, wide and clean and free of arrogance, and his damn near angelic face disarms me.

"Thanks. I did."

He crosses the room, standing only an arm's reach away from me. He eyes me, then holds out one of the bowls. "Gian's famous at the Villa for his sauce. Have some."

I take the bowl, inhaling the delicate scent of roasted garlic. My stomach rumbles. "Any word from him?"

"He left a note. I missed it—it was on the counter by the sauce."

"What did he say?" Relief comes over me. I pierce a noodle with the prongs of my fork, popping it into my mouth, and a ripe tomato bursts on my tongue. "This is delicious."

"He said he had a few things to deal with, but I know he's giving us space. And threatened me with death if I didn't feed you," he says. "The message was vague, and I don't like vague, but at least I could call off the brothers from putting out a search and rescue mission now that I've heard from him."

We eat in silence. "Let me clear up." I take his bowl. I hate the way the oil in tomato sauce stains.

He follows me down to the kitchen. I go to the sink. He stands beside me, resting against the edge of the counter so he can watch me as I clean. His stare is so focused. I've never had anyone show me so much interest, especially when doing something as mundane as rinsing a bowl.

His question surprises me as he asks, "Do you trust me?"

I stare back at him.

Do I trust him?

Digging deeper, I know one thing for sure: I trust myself. I wouldn't let anyone inside my body if I didn't trust them on some level. So, the answer is yes, I do trust him.

For how long, I have no clue.

"Come on," he says, still smiling. "Say yes."

I stop myself from swiping a fingertip over the adorable dimple on his cheek. "Yes. I trust you." I add, "Somewhat."

My answer makes his grin double. "Somewhat is all I need."

"You keep your expectations low," I laugh. "That's good."

He holds his hand out to me. "Come with me."

"Where?" I ask.

"Get your coat."

I need a moment to escape his heated gaze, so I head to my room. Opening the closet doors, I grab my coat from over the backpack, shrugging my arms into the sleeves.

The backpack on the floor stares up at me, reminding me of the contraband it holds. I stare down, thinking of the phone. Should I look now and see if I can turn off the ringer?

My heart thrums in my ears, and my face goes hot as I listen for footsteps. Nothing. Kneeling, I unzip the backpack, a few painfully loud teeth at a time, the sound unbelievably loud in the silent room. Still, no footsteps come, so I pull the gray hoodie from the bag. As I'm unrolling the hoodie, the phone pops out, landing on the

floor.

“Shoot.” I lift it with fumbling fingers, snapping the thing open. There’s a text. My heart lifts, immediately recognizing the number.

“Carter!” I whisper-shout to myself. “You’re okay.”

PHEE RUOK

My heart now pounds. He could come up any moment. It’s worth the risk to let Carter know I’m okay. The poor boy practically got thrown out my bedroom window.

Im OK!

How’d you get this number #

He writes back.

ur mom

haha

WHAT’S WITH THAT DUDE

Too many things to list here, Carter. It would take me three days on this tiny keypad,” I murmur. One ear out for Haze, I text back as quickly as I can.

Long story, but I’m good

Promise!

He texts back.

the teachers said you won some dope ass trip

is that true?

Hmm... what to say?

Heavy footsteps move around downstairs. "Ophelia? You ready?"

"Crap!" He's coming up.

I risk my ass, sending one last text to Carter, telling him it's all good and I'll explain when I get back. Wrapping the phone up, I shove the hoodie back in the bag, hopping up without taking the time to zip it closed.

I shut the closet doors, my hands gripping the knobs, and try to slow my heart rate as I stare at the white paint.

Can't breathe.

Attempting to look casual, I turn from the closet, pasting a bright smile on to greet him. He appears in the doorway. Looking too good. Too muscular. And too interested in what I'm doing.

Attempting to distract him with a little flirting, I bat my eyelashes. "Hey, you."

"Ophelia?" He eyes me, a brow furrowed. "You good?"

I drop the act. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just took a little longer than I thought. Sorry."

He holds his hand out to me with that sexy devil's grin of his. "Ready?"

Then, I do something I probably shouldn't.

"Ready."

And I take his hand and follow him into the night.

CHAPTER 19

Haze

We're back in the black Alfa, and I drive this time. I love the control of being behind the wheel, though I miss being in the back seat with her.

I drive down the gravel road, winding deep into the dark forest. The road widens. The wheels are no longer crunching on gravel, and we're riding on smooth pavement.

A clearing surrounded by woods has a helipad, with a shiny black helicopter parked on its paved center. The black paint contains the gold emblem of the Bachman Brotherhood: a large gold B in a thick font and a slighter B in a more delicate one. The letters are encapsulated in the same gilded circle as the Villa's emblem.

She scoots forward in her seat, looking out the windshield. "You guys have a helicopter hidden in the woods?"

"We do." I pull the car to the side, putting it in Park. "I thought you might like to see where I work."

She eyes me. "You work at the Villa with Liam."

"I do," I say. "We all do. But we have our own responsibilities as well."

"I thought you walked to work this morning." She shakes her head. "Was that only this morning?"

“Feels like a lifetime ago, doesn’t it?” We share a look. Heat passes between us. She’s the first to break our gaze. “Have you ever ridden in a helicopter?”

Tossing a look at me, she says teasingly, “What do you think.”

“No?” I laugh. She constantly makes my world feel upended. It’s only fair to pay it forward with a helicopter ride. “I thought you might like to see what I do for the family. And this is the best way to travel.”

She’s quiet as we climb in the chopper. I outfit her with her safety gear first, showing her how the microphone in the headphones works so we can talk over the engines, and then I settle myself. She’s not said a word. This is one of her quiet, nervous times. I almost miss her chatter. Almost.

“Ready?” I ask.

Finally, she admits, “I’m a little scared.”

I flash her a grin. “You trust me?” My breath catches as I wait.

Finally, she says, “Yes.”

“Enough to leave the ground beneath you?”

“I—” A smile comes over her, and she looks down at her lap. “Sure. Why not?”

“Good.” I prime the throttle. “We’re going to fly over our island, so this is the easiest way to show you.”

“A private island?” Holding her hands against the sides of her headphones, she laughs. “Should I have expected any less from Bachmans?”

I check the switches and flip on the battery. “Italy has over four hundred islands in the Mediterranean, Tyrrhenian, and Adriatic Seas.”

She quotes. “Italy’s well-known islands include Sicily, Sardinia, Capri, Ischia, and Procida. Last year’s geography lessons.”

“Good to see my money’s gone to good use,” I tease.

She shoots me an eye roll.

“Get ready. It’s going to be loud.” I turn the ignition switch and start both engines. They roar to life. I check the gauges and set the RPMs to fifty percent. I often fly alone at night to clear my mind. My pilot’s license has a night rating, and the chopper is outfitted with navigation and landing lights.

Before putting on my night goggles, I peek over at Ophelia. She’s a little paler than her usual, if that’s even possible, but she’s good. She looks up and gives me a brave smile, followed by a nod. She’s ready. I put on the goggles, engage the clutch, and turn on the alternator switch and timer.

As we rise from the concrete helipad, we lift off, and I can see the black Bachman Brotherhood emblem below us, guiding us home. Night flying can be dangerous, so I stay focused on the task while keeping her safe. I’m not used to having a passenger beside me on these evening flights. It feels... nice. I like having her here, beside me.

It feels as if she’s always been in that seat.

As we fly, I tell her about the project I’ve been focused on for the past five years. “We’re growing fast. We need more space. It doesn’t make sense to lose the protection of the forest at the Villa. I never was one for deforestation in the first place. I don’t want to clear more land.”

“Gian and I wrote an essay about humans’ impact on biodiversity,” she interjects.

“We’re keeping that in mind as we build. We have the funds and the resources to do it safely.” Speaking of safety, I add, “The Villa has the protection of the mountains, the woods, and the lake; I thought, why not the ocean? We’re already doing it with the Parish, an island off the coast of Greece.”

“Funny name,” she says.

“The origin story is that the family bought boats from a priest to first get to the island,” I explain.

We’re leaving the mainland now, flying over the ocean. The moonlight reflects white over the capped peaks that rise in the dark, glittering waters.

“The water is so beautiful at night,” she says. “I’ve never seen it like this.”

Pride rises in my chest that I’m the one who gets to show her these firsts. The island comes into view. We fly over. The shoreline is a narrow strip of rough, rocky terrain.

Tendrils of brown poke out from between the craggy stones. Stubborn vegetation determined to reach the sun. The soil doesn’t have the nutrients it needs. Still, it won’t stop reaching its goal. It’s the same as me.

“I had a meeting with Liam today.” I don’t mention that it didn’t go well. “Afterward, I came out here to do some work.”

And clear my mind. Not knowing I’d come home to find Gian gone.

“You seemed out of sorts when you left this morning,” she says shyly. “You didn’t even say goodbye.”

I can hear that I hurt her with my abrasiveness. I'm used to being surrounded by rugged, grown men. I need to soften for her. "Sorry about that. I woke up in a bit of a... daze."

She shrugs. "S'okay."

"After that meeting, I had to get away and blow off some steam, so I came here to hit some nails. Got a head start on the framing before the rain comes." I point to the early stages of the first structure I'm building. "It's dark, but you can see a bit of it."

"Hit a few nails?" She stares out over the concrete pad and the two-by-fours. "It looks like you single-handedly framed half this building."

"The framing phase goes fast." It's funny she knows the term for the framing phase. I joke, "Did you take carpentry at that fancy school?"

She surprises me with her answer. "I did, actually. Since we go to this rich kid school, one of the board members thought it'd be good for the students to take what they call a fundamentals class—something to do with their hands. Most of them can't fry an egg in a pan or do a load of wash. I think they have people for that."

Her words make me bristle. "Like me? Gian ironed this shirt before he hung it in my closet."

"We are flying over your private island in the family helicopter," she sniffs.

"I work hard for what I have. I came from modest beginnings." I grip the clutch tighter. "Nothing was handed to me."

"Same," she says. "Except for what was handed to me," she corrects herself. "The scholarship for the school, of course, and the stolen tuition that doesn't need to be

mentioned again. But I work hard at school, and when the opportunity arose to learn building skills, I jumped on it.”

“That’s brave,” I say.

“Yeah, as you can imagine, all the boys signed up for carpentry, and the girls signed up for gardening. There were a lot of jokes about ‘banging’ aimed at me, but I ignored them and worked hard.” She gives herself a nod of approval. “And it was the first class I aced.”

“I might have to pick your brain when I finish the housing phase of this project,” I say, pointing out into the water. “The second phase of building is out there.”

She stares over the sea. “In the ocean!”

“A place of protection for any Bachman who may need a safe space to hide out or lay low for a while—” I stop myself.

I’ve already shared too much. There’s a limit to what I can tell her. She’s not family—not yet.

I think of the futuristic prototype stored in my phone, a structure in the water, one large white circle in the center, four smaller ones outside of that, the edges of all the circles the same as our emblem. The first layer of housing is above water, with walls of windows to bring in the sun. The lower level will be a bunker, a safehouse underwater.

We’re silent on the car ride home, enjoying the forest’s peace. I like the fact that we can be quiet together. We’re pulling up to the house now. The porch light shines warmly over the navy blue door, illuminating the gold Villa emblem. Pulling into the drive, I relax, knowing we’re home.

We're home. That's a strange thought. Cutting the engine, I glance over at her. I trust her. I want to share with her. I pull out my phone, handing it to her. "Want to see the prototype for the structure in the water?"

She takes the phone. "You're asking the queen of biology class here. I haven't got the grade back yet, but after that essay, I'm sure I have a solid C in the class. Of course, I want to see this."

I have a passcode I can give her that will allow her to log in to a separate profile I keep on my phone for when I want to share something with a non-family member. I share it with her now. "The password is one—two—seven—capital B—five—nine—four."

"Okaaaay. Got it. We're in—" Her tone completely changes to an icy chill. "Haze. What the hell? How did you get this?"

I glance down at the illuminated phone screen. My stomach lurches to my throat. I'd forgotten the screen saver I'd applied.

A four-line poem that I still can't get out of my mind.

It was the one that made me feel close to Leah, the one that gave me hope, thinking that I could find someone like me in this world.

The void inside grows deeper still.

I search and seek but cannot fill.

Did I create the chasm on my own?

Or was I born to be alone?

My throat feels tight. My voice breaks as I speak. I reach out to take the phone back. "I meant to delete that."

She holds it away from me, her wide blue eyes filled with confusion, locking her eyes on my face. I stare out at nothing but feel her gaze on me.

Finally, she demands, "What are you doing with this?"

Whatever delicate trust we've built between us seems to disappear as quickly as it formed.

My gut roils. I stare out the window. "I don't want to say."

The color drains from her face as she stares at the phone in her lap. "I have a journal I write in when I feel lonely or out of place. I've never shared any of my writing. No one has ever laid eyes on what I've written. You know why? Because I don't want them to. So why on earth is my poem on your phone screen?" She huffs out an angry breath. "Well, four lines of it, anyway. And it's not even the best four."

Wait...

The poem is... hers?

I turn toward her, leaning my back against the car door. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's for my eyes only! I tuck it between my mattress and bedframe. How did you get it? Did you steal it when you were in my room that night?" She stares out the windshield, thinking, then shakes her head. "No. You didn't have time. I was there every moment. You couldn't have taken it then."

My chest is tight. My fingers grip the steering wheel too tightly. None of this makes

sense. All the turmoil I first felt when I found out I'd been had comes bubbling to the surface, bile rising in my throat.

I feel the heat from her eyes flinging fire at my face. "You haven't snuck in my room before, have you?"

"No. I haven't." I grip the wheel tighter to keep from pounding it with my fists, demanding answers.

Bewildered, she whispers. "I've never shared that journal with anyone."

Everything tilts. If the poem came from her journal, did her mom steal it? "It was one of your mom's messages to me. It... meant something to me, and I typed it in my notes on that profile. Didn't realize it saved as the screen cover."

"Wallpaper," she snaps.

I shoot back, "Whatever."

"Mom? She said she wasn't even the one who sent the messages?—"

I open my eyes, turning toward her. I feel my brow wrinkle. "When did she say that? I thought you had no idea about that other than your mom saying your tuition was paid."

She waits a beat to answer, and when she speaks, her words sound breathless, like she's been running. "When she told me about the tuition, she also said something funny about having the money but not being responsible." She heaves a breath. "I can't exactly remember—but it was something like that. It didn't make sense then, but now..."

Her words trail off. She peeks over at me.

I'm deep in thought. "Why would your mom steal a poem from your journal?"

"Four lines," she grumbles. "The rest was better."

"I liked it." I laugh at myself. "Obviously."

"Thanks."

The best I can think of is, "She was probably leaving breadcrumbs in case you eventually found out about the stolen money." I stare at the house, thinking.

"My mom respects my privacy." She crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't see her rooting through my room."

"If she wasn't sending me the messages..." I catch her gaze. "Who the hell was I talking to?"

She eases back against her seat. "I have no idea. But whoever it was will get a piece of my mind."

"The messages came from your home. We know that by the VPN. It was someone who was in your house and had access to your journal and the family desktop." I think of the boy. "Could it have been someone from school? Who has been in your house this past year?"

"Let's see... me, Mom, Grandma—Grandpa can't even log in to the computer—and..." She's debating saying his name, but finally, it comes out. "And Carter. There have been times when he'd be waiting for me to return from work. It could have been that he was in the house alone, but not often."

I hate feeling this way again. Humiliated. Hopeless. I rake a hand through my hair.
“Fuck!”

“Wow.”

I glance over at her. “Sorry.”

“S’okay,” she smiles. “We’re home. Let’s go in.”

Home. There’s that funny word again. I think of our two bedrooms.

She clicks off the phone, sliding it into the cupholder. “Want to have a sleepover in my room tonight?”

I feel the grin spread over my face. “Will you leave the window open for me?”

“You’re special,” she says softly. “You get to use the door.”

I’m so grateful for her at this moment. I grab her hand, bringing it up to my lips. I lock eyes with her and love what I see in them. She wants me, too.

I brush my lips over the back of her hand. “Am I the only one to hold the privilege?”

She gives a shy smile. “Yes.”

“I don’t share well with others,” I say.

“I’ve noticed.” She scoffs out a laugh. “I believe the last boy you found to be competition was thrown out my window.”

I shake my head. “I’m lying.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“It’s not that I don’t share well.” I move in closer. “I don’t share. At all.”

I close the space between us, devouring her in a hungry kiss.

We lose our clothes as we kiss our way up the stairs to her room. I love watching her, enjoying every inch of her body as she reveals it. She laughs and fumbles over her feet, stepping out of her sweats as we reach the second-floor landing.

My heart stops.

She’s not wearing panties.

“No panties again.” A feral growl comes out of me as I scoop her in my arms and lift her naked body against mine. “What are we going to do about that?”

CHAPTER 20

Ophelia

I laugh as I wind my arms around his neck, holding tight. My bare skin presses against the warm, solid plane of his broad chest as he carries me. I stare at his sculpted shoulders and washboard abs. He said he still plays ice hockey and doesn't like partying, so to keep the brothers off his back, he meets them at the gym when he can.

Mr. Gian, the caffeine police, says I'm still growing. I glance down at my chest, my naked breasts bared to Haze. It'd be nice if they could keep growing, too.

Even though I'm not voluptuous like the women he's probably used to, I don't feel shy in Haze's arms. I don't worry about what my body looks like, smells like, feels like. He tells me all the time. And if he ever stopped telling me, I would only have to look into his eyes to know what he thinks of me.

No one, NO ONE, has ever looked at me the way he does. Like I'm something to be devoured and simultaneously worshiped.

He washes my self-doubt away.

Except for that little mix-up in the car when I accidentally slipped up and admitted my mom told me she wasn't the one sending Haze the messages. Whoops. Talk about a heart attack moment. Yeah, defo got that info from my secret convo on my contraband flip phone. I hated lying to him, but I couldn't get Gian into trouble.

And I can't lose that phone.

Speaking of...

I run my fingers over the back of his head, stroking silky curls. "Should we go to your room?"

"I'm not waiting for another second." He runs his tongue over his bottom lip.

My heart beats faster, a combination of how he's looking at me and the fact that I just remembered that my phone is IN THIS ROOM.

But now he's kissing me. Easing his naked god-like body on the edge of my bed and pulling me onto his lap, straddling me over his muscular thighs. I'm shy at first, but then I place a hand on either of his shoulders, rising onto my knees. They sink into the mattress as I stare down at him.

"Hey there." I let my hair fall over my face and onto his shoulders.

"Hey, yourself." His hands are warm as they cuddle my B-cups. He looks up at me, whispering, "God damn, you're beautiful."

"So are you." I take him in, the dark scuff along his strong jaw. The tanned plane of his abs. The cock, hard and ready. Arousal pools between my thighs, my body as ready as his. I'm a little overwhelmed as I stare at its size. Obviously, since I've only had sex once, I've never been on top.

I freeze. What do I do? How do I do this?

Then he starts kissing my breast. My eyes close, my head lolling back. He makes me want to experience all the positions and try everything. My body takes over, seeking

him. I'm initially shy, taking my time as I ease down onto him, but then I warm up, getting the hang of things as I ride him.

I'm just getting in the flow when he takes my hand, moving it between my thighs. I break our kiss with a gasp. "What are you doing?"

"It's not what I'm doing. It's what you're going to do." He moves my fingertips around till they're on my swollen clit.

My body tenses. This feels so wrong. Shame flows over me. I'm so new to all of this. I'm not that comfortable doing it alone or in private.

To touch myself while he watches?

"I don't think I can do that..."

"Do it, baby. " His smooth voice makes me wetter. "Make yourself feel good. I want to watch."

Gah. Heat. Everywhere. Slowly, I move my fingers. "Ah..." The feeling is strange and good; the tingles, like when he does it, are only laced with a hint of power yet shame.

"That's so sexy." He lifts his hips off the bed, rewarding my obedience with a deep thrust of his cock.

I'm moaning; the feel of him rising inside me is incredible. As I relax, I find my stride. I'm not only getting the hang of this—I'm winning. I become a goddess seated on the throne of my glorious god.

My fingers move, and my hips roll. Our bodies pick up the pace. He begins bouncing

me on his lap, the penetration deeper, more impactful. My fingers stimulate my clit, and the orgasm builds all over me. My head flies back, my cries echoing into the night. He kisses my breasts, throwing me into another level of paradise as I ride the first wave of the heady climax. He moans against my nipple, enjoying his climax.

I see stars. My heart races. My ears ring.

My ears are ringing... my ears are... ringing?

The muffled, tinny sound of a phone breaks through the incredible wall of the final dregs of climax. I come crashing down, my body tumbling through the surf. NO! The phone is ringing.

My heart lunges into my throat. I stare down at him. He's lost in his man world, kissing my nipple in his afterglow. Maybe he didn't hear it. I moan. "Oh, that felt SO GOOD."

Please stop ringing. Please stop ringing.

The phone rings again. Sweat dots my brow. I press my face against the side of his, hoping to muffle the sound, and cry, "Wow, that was AMAZING!"

The freaking phone rings again.

He pulls away from me, searching my face. "What's that?"

"Nothing!" Okay, now I'm shouting like Grandpa does when he gets on a video call. I tone it down. I kiss his cheeks, distract him, move to his lips, murmuring, "I didn't hear anything."

His hands move to my hips. Fingertips sinking into my soft curves. He stares up at

me. “Why the hell is there a phone in this room?”

Now, the ringing stops.

“What do you mean?” I widen my eyes to baby deer status. I give a sexy shrug, hoping my breasts grab his attention. “I don’t hear anything.”

I knew he was strong, but now he lifts me straight up in the air, right off his cock, off his lap, and he stands, depositing me back on the bed without even taking a breath. Those muscles aren’t only for show.

He’s over to the closet in two strides.

I’m mentally apologizing to my quilt as I mop up with a lower corner and then pull it around my breasts.

Seeing as I’m about to be destroyed the moment he finds that phone, I’m trying not to ogle as he flings the closet doors open, but the wingspan on that man makes me want to sail off a cliff. The muscles in his shoulders, his muscular legs, his ass are sculpted stone, like one of the statues of David we saw at the Galleria Borghese on our field trip to Rome.

I didn’t know I was into butts. He sure is; that much was evident to me with his dastardly toy collection. My cheeks clench from thinking of the next size up of butt plug that’s undoubtedly coming my way.

Gathering the quilt tighter around my body, I rest against the headboard, watching him. He kneels down, muscles flexing under that olive skin as he goes to the only hiding place in the closet. He’s unwinding the gray hoodie.

I watch as the phone pops out and lands on the floor.

Traitor.

It's like slow motion in a horror movie when he picks up the phone and turns to me with laser-like eyes. "Where did you get this?"

"Oh my gosh!" I cry. "How did that get there?"

"Do they offer acting classes at that fancy school of yours?" He eyes me.

What a funny question. "No. Why?"

"I didn't think so." He narrows his gaze. "You're a terrible liar."

"Is that the worst thing a person can be?" I ask.

He stands. Naked. All ten feet of him. He holds the phone out. "Where did you get this?"

Protectiveness for Gian comes on strong. "I can't say."

"Can't," he demands. "Or won't."

I shake my head. "Can't."

He moves across the floor, pantherlike, toward me. "Do I need to spank the answer out of you?"

"Do what you like." I cross my arms over my chest. "I won't say."

"Gian is the only one who could have gotten you a phone," he says.

The phone rings. Again.

CHAPTER 21

Ophelia

“Oh, God.” I bury my face in my hands.

His stare is heavy on me as he flips the phone open aggressively. He answers it with a rude, “Hello?”

His eyes widen as he hears the voice on the other end of the phone. They talk to him for a long moment while I sit here, trying to breathe. Finally, he holds the phone to me, a dazed look of shock on his face.

He moves toward me. “It’s for you.”

“Oh. Um... Okay.” Holding the blanket tight around my chest, I scoot to the edge of the bed. Staying as far from him as possible, I take the phone.

He goes to find his pants, pulling them on one long muscular leg at a time while I answer the phone.

Threading his black leather belt loop by loop through his pants, he eyes me as I speak. “Hello?”

A long string of curse words in Italian comes through from the other end of the phone. At the end of the monologue, Gian says. “Sorry. I thought he’d be in his room sleeping, and it would be safe to call. God, he’s going to kill me.”

I try to ignore the dark stare from the shirtless man in the corner of the room as I tell Gian, “You and me both.” There’s a loud snort from the dark side of the room.

I glance up. If looks could kill, stab a knife through my heart. Now he’s pacing. He’s got a hand yanking through his hair. Good lord, we all know that’s a bad sign.

I’m already dead—why not press my luck?

“Harrison,” I ask sweetly, “would you mind giving me a little privacy?”

“PRIVACY.” His brows fly sky-high. “Are you being serious right now?”

“I just need to take this call.” I offer a weak smile.

He throws his arms in the air. “Unbelievable.”

I wait for his answer with my heart in my throat. He’s either going to tear me off this bed and spank my ass or leave. He stares at me a beat, then says, “Fine,” and storms out of the room. He closes the door behind him.

I Can Not Believe that worked. I have a little more power here than I imagined. That, or the afterglow made him weak. Collapsing against the bed, I exhale into the phone. “Oh wow. He left.”

“DIO MIO! Ophelia the Miracle Worker!” Gian cries into the phone.

I laugh, hearing his voice. “Don’t call me that yet—let’s see if I can keep us alive first.”

He gives a belly laugh, which makes me feel warm and homey. I say hello properly: “Mr. Gian! Hi!” Then, I rudely pepper him with questions: “How are you? Where are

you?”

“I’ll tell you where I’m not at.” He heaves a stressful sigh. “I hated to lie to you, but I’m not with my family.”

“Yeah, I heard something about that,” I say.

“I went on a little trip.” Emotion sweeps through his voice. “For you.”

“For me?” I squeak.

“For you,” he says. “I went to Scotland.”

“Scotland!”

“Scotland. I feel like there’s an echo on this call,” he laughs. “I had to go. Like Haze probably told you—I have no family. I’ll tell you more when we have time, but our conversation made my heart go out to you.” He takes a breath. “So here I am.”

I can’t believe this! “You’re there—now?”

“Yep!” I notice the echoey voices and music in the background as he says, “At a wee pub diving into some haggis right now.”

“Gah. Don’t eat that. Get the stew. That’s what my Grandma makes,” I say. “Wait—why are we talking about food? Tell me everything! What have you found out? I can’t believe you went all the way there for me?—”

The door flies open. I jump out of my skin. Haze has returned, still shirtless.

OH GOD HE’S BACK.

He storms over to me.

His thunderous voice booms through the room. “Hang up that phone. Right. Now.”

“Gian. Gotta go. I’ll call you back.” Grasping my only protection, my quilt-dress, I pop up from the bed like I’ve been struck by lightning.

“The hell you will.” He takes the phone from my hand and closes it with a flip. He tosses it over his shoulder, where it lands on the closet floor.

I gulp so hard I think I swallow a tonsil.

The man is l-i-v-i-d.

Must. Save. My. Ass.

Literally.

I stretch, yawning. “It’s SO late. Should we get some sleep?”

Ignoring me, he walks over to the cozy pink velvet armchair in the corner of the room—one of my favorite pieces he’s bought. I watch in awe, shock, and slight confusion as he drags it to the center of the room.

My interest turns to horror as he pushes the back down hard. My precious chair! Does he know the joy of settling down into a chair large enough to curl your legs up in, but small enough to embrace you like a hug? It’s so nice. If only I wasn’t dyslexic, I swear she’d turn me into an avid reader.

How dare he destroy my stuff in his anger! Well, technically, it’s his stuff, but still?—

“Hey!” Dragging my quilt-dress with me for modesty, I run to save her. “Careful. I love that chair. Don’t break it, please.”

“I’m glad you like it. I bought it just for you.” The chair now lays flat, almost like a chaise. But he’s not done. He grabs the top of the back of the chair, pushing it horizontally toward the center of the chair. As he does this, the middle of the chair slowly rises, creating a smooth velvet mound.

Before I can ask what he’s doing, he reaches up, tearing the quilt from me with one yank. I stand there, naked, cool air rushing over my body, making my nipples peak, tight with discomfort. His hungry gaze devours me. I want to cover myself with my hands, but before I can, he grabs me in his arms.

He tugs me over to the chair. “Hey! What are you doing?” He pulls me forward so I’m lying face down on the velvet, with my ass perfectly perched over the mound he’s created.

“You’ll stay put over this chair and take every lick of my belt.” He warns, “If you disobey me at all, I’ll plug your ass with the largest toy, then start all over again.”

Flurries of ice flutter throughout my belly. His belt? I’ve never been punished other than by his hand. I can’t imagine what being spanked with leather will feel like. “I—I don’t think I can.”

“You can and you will.” The clack of his metal belt buckle sends a chilly shiver down my spine. I tremble at the whoosh of leather as it slides through the loops of his pants.

I cringe, sensing him raising the belt behind me. My ass cheeks clench, and my eyes squeeze tight as I wait for the strap to fall. The belt whips down, leather cracking against my skin, filling the room, the pain hitting.

My fingers dig into the soft velvet edges of the chair. I cry out, choking with agony. “Oh, my—god!”

He wastes no time, bringing the belt down a second and a third time, each strike on fresh skin a new stripe across my ass. I tremble as his fingers trace over the fresh welts on my skin, each touch reigniting the searing pain. My body instinctively arches into his hand even as my mind screams for me to push away from him. But I don’t dare move.

I know better than to disobey the man wielding the belt.

“I love how the leather leaves red marks across your beautiful ass. When you sit down tomorrow, you’ll think of me.” He gives a dark chuckle. “If you even can sit.”

I’m overwhelmed by the pain, the humiliation of being naked, bared to him, entirely under his control. Another strike lands, and I gasp, liquid stinging at the corners of my eyes, the tears not just from the physical pain. There’s something more confusing mixed in, a medley of emotions I can’t untangle.

Deep in my belly, the complete surrender to him creates a deep sense of trust and vulnerability, the feeling intensely intimate and arousing.

I’m wetter with each stroke of his belt.

The belt continues to caress my skin, leaving behind traces of heat and lust. My determination remains unshaken, though I’m caught in a seductive game of pleasure and defiance. He will not hear me beg him to stop.

Each lash of the belt sends waves of pain and pleasure through my body as I struggle to maintain my composure. My skin tingles with a fiery desire fueled by his dominance over me. He prowls around me, his piercing gaze locking onto every inch

of my exposed flesh.

As I adjust to the pain, I peel away at the layers of the heady experience. The power he wields is intoxicating. I'm reveling in the control he has over me.

The belt comes down lighter now, taking its time as it lightly strokes over my skin as it leaves. With my eyes closed, I let myself sink into a state of erotic bliss amidst the onslaught of his lashes. Each strike only increases my desire, and I bite down on my lip to contain the moans that threaten to escape.

"How much more can you take, baby? Are you learning your lesson? You never, ever hide something from me. Do you, little girl?"

"Don't call me that," I hiss between my teeth. The pet name makes me seethe, like when he said something about my "tight little hole."

"You like it when I call you baby." He strokes lightly over the burning skin with a gentleness contrasting so starkly with the intense strikes. "Don't you?"

I don't answer, and I'm punished with a spank from his hand. He peppers my already burning ass with spanks till I finally admit, "Yes! Okay. I do!"

"Good girl." The belt hits the floor with a thud.

I didn't realize every muscle in my body was tensed till I heard that sound, but now my belly and chest collapse against the chair. "Oh god." I try to breathe, think, and calm myself down.

I'm not even close to even breaths when he speaks. "Now, I want you to return to what you were doing before your little phone call interrupted us. I want you to lay here, on your back, and touch yourself. And I'm going to watch."

Thank God my face is buried in the chair right now, and he can't see how flushed his words make me. I did so well, never begging through all the fiery lashes of the belt. But what he demands now is too much. Doing it with him while perched on his lap was different. Putting on a show for him?

The shame comes in a hot wave, threatening to drown me.

"No," I beg. "Please. Don't make me do that."

"I'll give you one more option," he says, his voice low and dark.

"What?"

His rough, calloused hands find my back, smoothing their way over my shoulders, down to my waist. I suck air between my teeth as they stroke my punished curves. "I'll take care of your clit for you?—"

Okay, that sounds really good right now. But I'm guessing there's a catch.

His hands go between the tops of my thighs and slide my legs apart, my knees dragging along the velvet as they spread. Cool air dances over my wet creases. His fingertips find the arousal there, dipping in long enough to make me moan with desire.

They leave too soon, dragging upward. He fingers my tight rear entrance with a slick fingertip, making my breath hitch in my chest. "I'll own your pleasure, but I'm going to fuck you in your tight little ass while I do it."

All the color drains from my face, the air leaving my lungs. I finally gasp out, "But I've only ever had the first toy inside. How would that work? How would you fit?"

He gives an amused chuckle. “It’s meant to hurt, baby. It’s a punishment fucking.”

His words send a chill through me. His fingers venture between my thighs, gliding along the intimate folds of my body, playfully nudging at the entrance of my pussy. His now slick fingers trace a tantalizing pattern around my sensitive nub, as promised, but the pleasure is out of reach.

The fiery sting radiating from my punished ass is now warm as he touches me. I find myself swaying in time with his teasing caress. Then he’s gone. The sounds of a drawer, a cap popping open, and a squeeze of lube leave me panting, terrified, and clutching the velvet edges of the chair, agonizing over what is to come.

My heavy breaths and his lowering zipper are the only sounds in the room.

Before I can ready myself for what’s coming, he parts my cheeks, pressing the lubricated head of his cock against the tight ring of muscle of my ass. Without warning, he drives his substantial girth into me, causing me to gasp as I accommodate him. I cry out from the intensity of his entrance.

My mouth gapes, my fingers stretch out, reaching for safety as tears burn at the backs of my eyes, my ass on fire. Despite the stretching, burning pain and discomfort, to my shock, my body welcomes every inch of his massive girth.

A low growl escapes him as he keeps a firm grip on my hips, delving deeper into me. Each contact of him against my tender flesh amplifies the rawness left by welts on my skin as I gasp and buck beneath him.

This punishment is doled out in intimacy, and he wants my discomfort. As our bodies move together, I know this is about his retribution, not my pleasure. Luckily, his hand snakes around my waist, finally fulfilling his promise.

My cries echo in the room as pain mingles with pleasure. The feeling deep within becomes all-consuming; him in my ass, on my clit, an overwhelming sensation that blocks out everything else until there is only me, him, and the relentless rhythm of his body claiming mine.

I whimper as the familiar tight sensation tugs at my core. It's unreal how quickly I'm now teetering on the precipice of an orgasm deeper than any of the others. He pinches my clit just as the tsunami hits, stealing my breath and sending me spiraling off a cliff into a mind-numbing ecstasy of pain and pleasure.

My body quakes as my inner muscles clench around him.

He doesn't stop. Instead, he continues his relentless pace, driving me further into the velvet cushion, rubbing my clit, and fucking me into the abyss of pleasure that seems never-ending. It consumes me whole until my eyes roll back, and my body convulses beneath him.

"I can't take any more!" I beg.

Finally, he gives a deep moan, clinging to my hips as he leans further over me. I feel his cock explode in my ass, filling me with heat and liquid. His come spills over, running down the inside of my thighs.

My precious chair. My afterglow quickly dissipates as the burning from my ass turns to throbbing, and the horror of the mess we've just made on the velvet creeps into my worries.

He strokes my hair back from my face, both my skin and hair damp from perspiration. And he whispers the most beautiful words in my ears. A phrase that tells me he not only cares for me—immensely—he knows me.

His voice is a purr. “Don’t worry, baby. The fabric was made for this. It’s waterproof and easy to clean.”

I relax against my lovely chair with a soft “Ah...”

He strokes my back, avoiding the throbbing welts across my ass. I can sense him bending down, and there’s the sound of a drawer opening as he reaches beneath the magical chair. “You’re far too perfect to be in pain any longer.”

Curious, I glance over my shoulder, watching him clean himself with a cloth. He then twists the lid of a small silver pot, and the soft scent of warm vanilla reaches me. He scoops two fingers into the pot, gathering a generous amount of a clear, jelly-looking substance.

He moves to me, kneeling beside me. It feels strange to be laid out on the chair on my belly, completely exposed, leaking sex liquids with him kneeling at my side, his face right at my ass. But then his fingers are on me, spreading the wonderful warm salve all over my skin, and my eyes close. All I can do is melt into the cleanable velvet.

“As much as I enjoy seeing the lovely red marks my belt made on your skin, you’re far too beautiful to leave them.” His finger glides between my ass cheeks, rubbing the salve over my sore hole, instantly soothing my skin. The throbbing leaves my tight muscles healing like magic.

“What is that stuff?”

“Magic Bachman Balm. Twenty-five hundred euros a pot, and you must be family to buy one. You’re my first patient. How do you like it?”

“I love it,” I croon. I like it even better that I’m the only woman he’s used it with.

He wipes a fresh bead across the last welt. “All the wives talk about this stuff.”

“The wives?” A prick of a question tugs at my mind. “Are they nurses or something?”

“Nurses?” He belly laughs. “What makes you say that?”

“Why else would they all need this salve?” I ask.

He stands, wiping his hand on a fresh cloth. He puts the salve back where it came from. Then our eyes lock.

He says, “Same reason as you.”

Wait—what? ALL the wives do this kind of stuff as well? A million questions fill my mind. I pop up on an elbow, ready to interrogate him. “You can’t say something like that and not tell me more?—”

The ringing of a phone cuts off my words. The same sound that started this whole crazy sexcapade.

This time, it’s his phone that’s ringing. It must be three in the morning by now. Nothing good ever comes from a phone call in the dead of night.

Page 22

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CHAPTER 22

Haze

The phone call is from Gian. I leave her with a kiss on her brow, going to my room, ready to demand answers from him. Gian's supposed to be my right-hand man. Years we've been together, and she shows up. She is here for one day with him, and he turns his back on me to help her.

Can I blame him? Her powers are strong.

Gian and I speak, and he begs forgiveness for giving her the phone, then fills me in on his disappearance. After we hang up, I hop in the shower, turning the heat to full blast. I lather my skin and hair with soap, scrubbing as I process.

So, those lines from the poem were hers.

But who stole them?

When she named everyone who lived in her house and could have been responsible, she left one person off the list.

Herself.

Leah says she's not the guilty party. Supposedly, Grandpa can't log in. Grandma? Doubtful she could create a dating profile, stalk me, catfish me, then lure me to the park to rob me.

Sounds like the work of a teenager.

Ophelia works at a fast-food chain in town, where the older regulars love the cheap American coffee. I'm sure she has retired regulars—ones whose trust she could earn and pay off by bumping into me at the park and taking my wallet.

Her glowing vocabulary, the carpentry class, and the essay show how hard she works at school. However, she lost the scholarship one semester before graduation and needed that money.

Ophelia can access her mom's photos and information, so it would be easiest for her to create a fake account. But is she capable?

I rinse, dry, and dress, collapsing into bed. I lay there, arms folded under my head, staring at the ceiling. The door opens, a shred of light from the hall illuminating the carpet.

Showered and dressed in sweats, she climbs into my bed and curls into my arms. The feeling is so familiar that I almost think she must have slept here that first night, which I thought was a dream.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her closer, burying my face in her damp, floral-scented hair.

"Sorry about the phone," she whispers. "I had to know my family was safe."

I think of how I spent my last half hour, mistrusting her, wondering if she could have been the one writing me messages. She's a terrible liar. My gut tells me to trust her. I let go of everything between us that isn't this gentle moment. I kiss the back of her head. She gives a satisfied sigh, her body relaxing against mine.

We sleep until eight, and we have tea and toast for breakfast. I tell her we're cutting class today to spend the day together, which makes her smile. Then, I ask her what she wants to do with her day.

She looks up at me. "I'm about to ask you for the biggest favor of my life."

I already know what she'll ask for. Gian and I planned the entire trip on the phone last night. Still, it's fun to make her ask since she hid the phone from me.

"After being so naughty? You need a favor?" I eye her.

Her pretty face flushes. "I need to go to Scotland. Today. Gian is helping me discover what happened to my father and more about my past." She looks off, shaking her head to herself. "I don't know why I need to know, but I do."

Hearing how important this is to her, I feel bad for making her ask. I take her in my arms. "I know, baby. Gian and I have already planned everything out for you."

"You have?" She stares up at me. I nod. She rises on tiptoe, planting a sweet kiss on my cheek. "Thank you!"

We each pack a bag and head to Inverness, the heart of the Scottish Highlands, set on the banks of the River Ness. Taking the private family jet, we arrive at a small pub, the address Gian gave us, in time for an early dinner. She warns me not to order the haggis.

The bar is cozy, with low ceilings, dark wood, and forest green wallpaper. Being later in the afternoon, Scottish accents fly around us as people banter and converse. It's Thursday, so the early-out-of-work crowd who want to extend the weekend are trickling in for drinks.

A couple of gray-haired men are drinking ale in the corner, engaged in a lively game of darts.

She says, “While we’re waiting for Gian, let’s investigate the whole ‘why my poem is on your phone screen’ question.”

“We know how it got there,” I offer.

“But we don’t know which villain dared to read and SHARE my private writing.” She gives me a serious look, her tone filled with distaste. “And what’s worse? They used that journal to rip your heart out of your chest and steal your money.”

The loyalty in her tone—her being angry for me—fills me with a good feeling of trust.

“Let’s focus,” she says. “What do we need to figure out?”

I say, “I want to know who sent me those messages and how many were your words.”

“Let’s find out.”

“How?”

She gets a mischievous gleam in her eyes as she unzips her bag. I watch as she pulls out the little contraband phone. She holds it up. “I hope it’s okay that I snuck this out of the closet when I packed my bag. I thought it might come in handy for this mission.”

“Okay,” I say.

“It’s an hour ahead in Italy, right?” she asks.

“Yeah...” Where is she going with this?

“So, it’s well into wine o’clock! My mom is a lightweight. Using this phone, I can try to get some answers.” She flips it open. “Can you text on this thing?”

Moments like these remind me how young she is. I show her how to text on the small screen.

Her nose crinkles. “This is going to take forever. Did you all really use these?”

“Back in the day. Should you call her instead?”

“I think text is better.” She shoots me a cop look. “Then we have evidence if we need to confront her later.”

“Great idea.” I fully trust Ophelia. How can I not? She only snuck the phone to make sure her family was safe. I can’t fault her for that. She never truly betrayed my trust in her.

She types her messages in, one painstaking line at a time. It’s funny watching someone younger than me struggle so badly with old tech. I ease my elbow onto the dark wood pub table, leaning my head against my palm, grinning as I watch.

Mom its me

This wasn’t a hotel number

Is a cell they gave me

I just didn’t want u blowing me up

She exhales, staring at her work. “Okay, that’s all true so far.”

“You don’t like to lie, do you?” I ask.

Her face crumples. “No. I hate deceit.”

Even more trust for her grows. “Good,” I say. “That’s good.”

Holding the phone, she raises her sneakered feet onto the balls of her feet, and her knee bobs up and down from nerves as she waits for a response. “I hope she texts back. I mean, she always texts back right away.”

I put a reassuring hand on her knee to calm her. “We have time.”

The phone dings.

“Wow. It’s her!” She scoots her chair away from the table. “Come here, bring your chair beside me so we can read these together.”

I follow her orders, moving my chair beside her. Our arms press together as we stare at the phone as her mom’s answer comes through.

Hi! How are you?

How many boys have you kissed?

“What is she asking that for?” I demand.

Ophelia shakes her head, muttering, “Just ignore her.” Now, having some practice, her thumbs fly over the tiny keypad, typing her message.

How's everyone at home

Her mom answers.

All good! I miss you!

Ophelia pauses a moment, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. Then, she types.

Me too!

Any word on who sent those messages

Our arms press together tighter, waiting for a response.

I still don't know who catfished him

But I finally hacked into the account

I read the messages

I think its someone from your school

Maybe Carter?

I watch her face as her brow knits in confusion. "Why Carter?" Her mom sends more messages before Ophelia can type anything else out.

The writings... they sounded like YOU

I searched your room after I read them

Found your journal

Ophelia and I look up at one another simultaneously, our eyes locking. More texts come through.

All the main messages

The ones that meant something

They were direct quotes

From you

At once, Ophelia and I come to the same conclusion—the phone forgotten. Almost the whole time I was messaging Leah, I was reading Ophelia’s innermost thoughts.

“You were talking to me.” She stares at me.

I say back, “I was reading your journal entries. I was getting to know... you.”

“I mean... kind of.” She goes into nervous chatter, texting her mother a quick thanks and goodbye. “Like, it wasn’t me writing the messages, but... those were my words you were reading.”

“And I loved them all. It wasn’t your mom’s profile pic that made me click on it. It was her words.”

“My words.”

“Your words,” I echo back.

I want to propose. Almost. I should at least share how I feel about her. I reach out, grabbing the hand that doesn't hold the phone. "Ophelia?"

Gian's voice booms over the table, drawing our attention. "Hello, fellow Scots! How are we on this glorious day?"

The moment gone, I drop her hand from mine. "Gian!"

I'm looking at a Scottish version of the man I know. I recognize his polished black boots, but I've never seen the fitted gray and black Tartan pants he wears or the matching tartan tie that hangs over his crisp white button-down.

Ophelia doesn't take a beat to even look at the man before flinging herself into his arms. "Mr. Gian! You're here."

"You mean, you're here! And early, too." They hug tightly. I stand to shake his hand. He eyes the closeness of our seats. "Look at you two lovebirds canoodling in the Inverness Lion's Gate Pub."

Ignoring his jest, she pats her hands on his chest. "I missed you so much! I still can't believe you're here!" She pulls out a chair. "Come, come. Sit down. Sit down."

"I'll get you a drink." I put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it as I pass him to go to the bar to retrieve his extra dirty martini with four olives. Neither acknowledges my departure as they sit, instantly chatting at a speed I couldn't keep up with anyway.

A beautiful bartender who looks to be in her late thirties tosses her long blonde hair over her shoulder, greeting me with a cheeky, "Well 'ello there. Aren't you easy on the eyes, lad?" She leans on the bar, revealing ample cleavage. "What can I get you?"

I give her Gian's order. She laughs. "I'd have pegged you for an IPA man, myself."

“I am,” I say. “It’s for a friend.”

“Oh, a lady friend,” she grins.

I’ll tease Gian with that ammunition later. “Actually, it’s for?”

Reading her expression, I stop myself. She’s not flirting for tips. She’s gently prying to see if I’m unattached. She looks up at me from under her lashes, awaiting my answer.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding at Ophelia sitting at our table. “I’m with her. Thanks.”

Disappointed, she shrugs. “All the good ones are taken and all that, eh?” She gives me a wink and goes to make the drink.

I glance over at Ophelia, who is unaware of the exchange. Funny, another woman hasn’t even crossed my mind since I’ve been with her. Is that what it’s supposed to feel like? When you do ask someone to marry you—the proper way?

And if I asked her...

What would her answer be?

I return with the drink, sitting down to hear Gian’s words to Ophelia.

He’s reaching for her hand, saying, “I found the woman you were looking for.”

“Who?” I ask, clueless as to what they’re talking about. I stare at Ophelia. “Who were you looking for?”

Gian answers me, “The woman with the pearl necklace.”

What little color lives in Ophelia's cheeks drains away. She stares at Gian as if she's just seen a ghost. She whispers, "You're kidding?"

Who is the woman with the pearl necklace? And what does she mean to Ophelia?

CHAPTER 23

Ophelia

My heart is in my ears. Thrum-thrum-thrumming like a base drum. I feel dizzy. “What’s her name?”

He pauses, then says, “Freya.”

Finally hearing for the first time the name of the woman who saved me, my fingers go to my neck, searching for the pearls I’m not wearing. “Freya.” I let the name roll around in my mind.

Does she have long blonde hair like I picture her? I feel silly asking, so I don’t.

“Let me start at the beginning so I don’t confuse you,” Gian says. I listen, hanging on to his every word as he reveals everything he’s learned about my past. “When your mom was nineteen, she briefly dated someone older than her. A man named Ross Macdonald. He was a gang member of the Hoax.”

“The Hoax is the one based in Glasgow—” I swallow my remaining tonsil, clarifying, “The one you said was really bad. Right?”

“Fraid so,” Gian says softly. “Your grandparents never took to him, even before they learned about his criminal past. During that short time, Leah got pregnant by him. He wanted custody of you when you were born, and he got it.”

The question slips from my mouth. “How?”

I wait for the part where Gian reveals the terrible thing my father did to take me away from my mother. The violence he used against her with the power of the Hoax. The threats he made against her.

He shrugs, offering, “She was young. She was broke. He was older and had resources, and your mom relented.”

“Oh.” My thoughts fall away. I feel numb. Was it that easy to give me up? I’m young. I’m eighteen. If I was pregnant, I can’t imagine leaving that baby without a fight. Haze wraps an arm around my shoulders, holding me closer.

“I know more about your father,” Gian says. “I’ll start with his real name.”

“Was it not Ross Macdonald?” I ask.

“No.” Gian shakes his head. “That was an alias he used to keep away from the law.”

I feel my face wrinkle with confusion.

Haze interjects with, “It’s common in our world.”

“His real name was Tartan Erwin—when he died, he was a thirty-four-year-old Scottish man with prior convictions.” Gian continues, “He had blue eyes—lighter than yours, I’ve heard—and a vine tattoo on his neck.”

“A vine tattoo...” A faraway vision comes closer, my finger tracing the outline of an oval-shaped leaf. Another false memory of him pieced together by tidbits I’m hearing, or is it real? I look at Gian. “Do you know what type of vine it was on the tattoo?”

“I have no idea, sweetheart.” Gian lays a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve never even seen a picture,” I admit.

Haze rubs comforting circles on my back. “Your family should have given you a photo to have.”

“No kidding...” I murmur.

I’ll never speak ill of them, but now, with Gian almost a stranger and realizing how important it is for me to know about my past, I’m angry at my family. How can they not see that hiding my father from me is not what’s best?

We three are quiet momentarily, the two men allowing me time to process. Gian turns to Haze and says, “Get her a wine. She needs it for her nerves.” Haze hesitates to leave my side, but his eyes flicker over my face; what he sees makes him decide I need the wine. He leaves us, going to the bar.

Haze returns with a chilled glass of white wine. “This will take the edge off. Riesling. It’s a little sweet. I haven’t seen you drink, so I thought this might be a good starting point.”

Grateful, I thank him. I sip, the bright, cold flavor bursting on my tongue. “It’s sweet. I love it.” What I love more is how he slips his arm around my shoulder. The feel of his warmth, weight, and strength against me calms me.

My eyes lock on Gian’s as I steel my nerves and ask the question I’ve been in desperate need of the answer to for so long now. My palms feel damp, and I wipe them over my thighs. “How did my dad die that day? What happened?”

Gian takes a breath, takes a sip, and steels his own nerves. He pops an olive in his

mouth and chews. Finally, he locks his eyes on mine.

What he says next comes as a complete shock.

“He was trying to leave the Hoax,” Gian says. “For your sake.”

I let the idea settle in that my father loved me and that he wanted what was best for me, and that the reason he died was because he was trying to make things better.

For me.

“He was hiding out with you in Edinburgh. But that’s the thing about a crime family.” He and Haze exchange a glance. Haze looks away. Gian says, “Once you join, you can’t leave.”

Gian continues, “He was crossing the street with you in his arms when he spotted the hitmen of the Hoax. He saw Freya across the street. He didn’t know who she was, but something about her made him choose her. He thrust you into her arms, and moments later, he was shot.”

My father holding me. The loud noise.

My vague memories... are they... real? I’ve done my research. I paid attention in Psych class.

I was what? Only two? Maybe two and a half. You can remember things that young, especially if the memories are tied to trauma.

“Freya and her husband took you home with them. She called you Pearl for the necklace she wore that day, the one you liked to play with so much. Also, she thought your face looked like a little white pearl encapsulated in the dark shell of your hair.”

It's too painful thinking of my father's death, so I focus my mind on Freya. In my memory, she's like a beautiful, golden ray of sunshine. The thought of being her wee black pearl—it's lovely. I think of myself as a pearl buried in a dark, shining oyster shell.

"Oh, that's... so nice." My voice cracks.

Don't cry, Ophelia. Don't you dare cry.

Gian puts his smooth, manicured hand over mine. "She and her husband live in a miniature castle and run it as a bed and breakfast. The same one they brought you home from Edinburgh to. It's right here in Inverness. They're waiting for us there now."

Freya is waiting for me, and I'm invited to the place I went to moments after my father died. The idea is wonderful but overwhelming. I lift my glass, bringing it to my lips—and down half the glass. The wine is cold in my mouth but warms as I drink it. I pinch the stem between my forefinger and thumb, twisting it as I absorb the idea of seeing Freya in the flesh.

"The woman with the pearl necklace is waiting for me," I say. I correct myself. "I finally know her name. Freya is waiting for me."

"Freya and her husband, Fredrick Frisque, also fell in love with you during your stay at Inverness," Gian says, "and we're all going to see her now."

"Oh, my God." I try to process, but I can't.

"The Frisques have sent a car. It's waiting for us outside."

Gian takes the front passenger seat on the ride. Haze sits in the back with me, his

shoulder close against mine, my hand tightly in his. We ride through the town of Inverness, following along the river, my heart in my stomach the entire way. The castle comes into view, and my breath catches. Do I remember this place?

A sturdy, two-story red sandstone square sandwiched between three towers. All the windows are arched at the top in half-moons facing the river. A woman stands at the top of a tall set of stone stairs.

My heart sinks. It's not that the person standing in front of the beautiful wood doors of the castle doesn't seem like a perfectly lovely person—she's just nothing like my memory of her.

The woman is much older than I remember. She is short-statured and has an air that makes you think of homemade cookies with milk. Her steel-gray hair has white streaks and is pulled back in a severe bun. Tortoiseshell glasses are perched on her nose. She wears a light-blue apron. I can't make out the emblem from here, but I'm sure it's for the castle.

My disappointment in my false memory disappears as we exit the car. We're about to enter a real castle tied to my past and my dad, and I feel a childlike joy.

Haze stands to my right, Gian to my left. My complicated lover/protector and my best friend.

I love my family, yet can't help but think of the deceit, lost stories, and forgotten memories. They wanted to protect me, but cutting every memory of my father from my life wasn't the right choice for me. I think of how, at this moment, my mom would be chattering about how lovely the castle is, how Grandma would be fretting over our outfits, thinking we weren't dressed up enough, and Grandpa's face would be pinched up at the opulence of a castle as a home.

Yes, I love them dearly; I'd do anything for them. Even marry a stranger. I peek at Haze's, my husband-to-be's, side profile, which is as achingly handsome as every other view of him. I'll marry up in the looks department, but hopefully, I will bring some much-needed sunshine to our partnership.

Sensing my stare, he shoots me a look of reassurance, reminding me, "This is a good thing."

"I wouldn't want anyone else beside me now," I whisper to them.

"Aw, bless, bambina!" Gian flicks away a tear. Haze and Gian each take one of my hands, Haze squeezing tightly. We stare up at the castle for a moment.

"Well, are ye comin' in, or are ye waiting for me to come to carry ye up the stairs?" The woman staring down at us plants her hands on her hips, removing her right hand just long enough to give me a demanding wave. "Ms. Pearl, get yourself up these stairs. I haven't seen you since you were a wee bairn! Come give me a squeeze, wain."

The warmth in her stern voice has me leaving the men, running up the stairs, and flinging myself in her arms. I feel silly because tears spring up as she embraces me warmly. "Oh, Pearl, to see your face again..."

"Don't steal all the hugs, Morven."

The melodic voice instantly draws my attention. I turn to look over my shoulder. Standing in front of an open castle door is a beautiful woman. Tall and thin, with pin-straight ice-blond hair hanging down her back, she is dressed in black couture, a dress with an asymmetrical neckline and hem, looking elegant with a little edge I love.

If I ever wore a dress, it would be like the one she wears now.

My memories may be fuzzy and scarce, but I feel the familiarity as I stare at her. “Freya.”

“Pearl!” Freya quickly corrects herself. “I mean, Ophelia. Look at you!” The woman who must be Morven releases me. I move to Freya. “My goodness, you’re stunning. And yet your face.” She presses a cold hand on either of my cheeks, staring deep into my eyes. “Same as I remember.”

I stand in awe, feeling her hands on my face. “I think I remember you too...”

A well-dressed man joins us, sliding an arm around Freya’s waist. Freya introduces him as her husband, Fredrick. He shakes my hand, speaking with a hint of a French accent. “Ophelia. It’s been a minute since we’ve seen you last. I believe you were in diapers last time you were here at Wee Inverness.”

“Wee Inverness?” Haze asks.

Freya laughs, the sound like tinkling bells. “That’s what we call the castle. It’s a mini replica of the real thing. And yes, you were just a wee little thing.” She laughs again. “We’d never changed diapers before your stay. I’m sorry to admit—I put yours on backward before I got the hang of things.”

My face heats, and I change the topic before Haze can hear more about me in diapers. “I’d love a tour of the castle! It would be fun to see if any memories spring up.”

“Yes! Let’s! Come on, everyone,” Freya says. “I’ll lead the way.”

“All except me,” Morven says. “I’ve been touring this castle every day for twenty years. I’ll go make the tea.”

As we walk the halls, Freya fills me in on what she can. Besides my many likes and

dislikes as a toddler at the castle, she doesn't have much more information than Gian already shared.

She does say one thing that grabs me. Walking to the renovated ballroom, she says, “Your grandmother, Cass, worked at the police station outside Glasgow for many years.”

I feel my ears prick as she says it. This is news to me. My brows shoot sky-high as I ask, “She did?”

“She was the first woman hired and brought on as secretary, but others say she ran the place over time, and the men looked to her for guidance.” Freya leans into me as if telling a secret. “I heard she was a tech whiz, too, and doubled as their IT department.”

My hair stands on end, and creepy-crawling tingles go down the back of my neck. My grandma, grandpa, and mom have never mentioned that my grandma worked for the police. My grandma, who can’t change a television channel without me, is a tech whiz.

Haze and I exchange a glance.

Freya opens the double doors, revealing a grand room that looks like it has been prepared for an upcoming wedding. “This is the ballroom!”

“Excuse us one moment.” I grab Haze’s hand, dragging him out to the hallway.

“Oh! Okay...” Freya gives us a curious look as we go.

Gian steps in, helping out. I hear him talking to Freya and Fredrick as I pull Haze out of hearing range. “Look at those arches!” he says. “Were those hand-carved?”

We come across an alcove built into the hallway wall decorated with dark pink and blue floral wallpaper and a dark wood table between two small chairs. An old-fashioned landline phone sits on the small circular top.

I pull him into the small space. “Thank God for Gian.”

“He’s smooth. I’ll give him that.” He stares at me. “What do you think about what Freya said about your grandma?”

“I don’t know what to think!” I bite my lower lip, wondering. “It seems crazy that she would be the one to set all that up and steal the money, but...” My eyes lock with his. “Who else possibly could have done it?”

“If she lied about her technical abilities, could your grandfather have too?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

We stand there together, thinking. Finally, he looks at me. “You know what?”

Has he figured it out? “What? Tell me.”

“You know what?” he says again before shaking his head. “It doesn’t even matter right now.”

“I guess you’re right.” I think of Freya’s confused look when I pulled Haze away for this chat. “Let’s go back to the ballroom. I don’t want to be rude.”

“Agreed.” Hand in hand, we walk back to the ballroom, sneaking a few kisses along the way.

Freya claps her hands to see us return. “You’re back! Let me show you the altar we

have set up.”

I try to focus on the décor she’s showing me, but my mind wanders to my grandma’s police work and all the family secrets I’m hearing. My attention shifts back to Freya as she tells me her memory of her wedding, right here in this ballroom where I was a guest.

She leans her head on Fredrick’s shoulder. “When this man kissed me, the first kiss after saying our vows, I was so overwhelmed with joy I felt like I was floating. And I saw you in Morven’s arms, clapping your wee hands, and your giddy wee laugh—” She’s overwhelmed by emotion. She slips a hand in the pocket of her dress, pulling out a tissue. “See, Fredrick, I knew I’d need this! I came prepared.”

“Freya rarely cries,” he explains.

“I hate crying. It’s hard enough to be a strong woman in a man’s world without ruining my mascara. But happy tears are different.” She captures both my hands in hers. “You were at our wedding, and it was such a special day. And now, we’re going to be at yours!”

“My what?” I ask.

“Your wedding!” She looks from Gian to Haze, then back at me. Whatever she sees in the two men’s faces makes her drop my hands from hers so she can throw them on her hips, demanding answers from Haze and Gian. “You didn’t tell her!”

I turn to stare at Haze. “Tell me what...” He’s avoiding my gaze, raking a hand through his hair.

Gian is not much better, staring at the toes of his polished black boots.

“Okay, men.” I borrow a gaze from my strict math teacher, focusing it on Haze first, then Gian. “Spill it,” I demand. “What is going on here? What have you two planned?”

“You’ll have to excuse us again.” Haze steps in, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as he says, “We’ll be right back.”

I look at Gian again, but Mr. Smooth only offers a sheepish grin. Haze guides me down the hall until we’re out of the others' hearing range. He moves me so my back is against the wall. His hands are warm on my waist, calming my nerves.

But even he can’t stop my nervous chatter as I fire questions at him. “What’s going on? What is Freya saying about a wedding? And what did you want to ask me?”

“I meant to ask you—” He stops speaking and stares at me with an intensity I’ve never experienced before.

I’m suddenly overwhelmed.

Learning about my father, meeting Freya, and being at the castle again is a lot. I need comfort; I need to be close to him. I wrap my arms around his neck. I want a hug, a kiss, to crawl into bed and snuggle for an hour.

“Kiss me,” I beg. “Make the whole world go away like you do.”

"Always," he says. "And only for you."

His intense gaze softens into a warm stare, heating me from the inside out. I know what's coming, and the anticipation is almost as thrilling as the feeling of the actual kiss when his lips meet mine.

Everything else fades away at this moment.

I love how he does this—how he makes the world disappear until it's just me and him. Us.

His tongue expertly explores my mouth, murmuring past my lips, “I love the way you taste.”

“Same,” I say. “All man, clean and powerful and sexy. And you smell just as good as you taste.”

“Damn, girl. You know how to make a man feel like one.” He deepens the kiss and holds me closer. I lightly scratch my fingertips over the back of his head, getting lost in the tangle of his soft hair. He gives a soft growl. “God, I love it when you do that.”

He begins to run his hands over my body with an urgency I don't fully understand. His hands are all over me, smoothing, grasping, kneading my curves. My own desperate fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, running over his broad shoulders and down his back.

He breaks the kiss only long enough to whisper to me, “I want to know if you're wearing panties or not.” He slips his hand down the back of my jeans, then goes back to kissing me while squeezing my bare ass.

His hips press close, and I can feel his arousal pressing hard against me. I'm fully consumed by an overwhelming need to lose myself entirely to him. Then I remember where I am.

This kiss—it's getting out of hand.

Freya's not seen me in over a decade, and this is not how I want her to find me—with

my boyfriend's hands down the back of my jeans. I mean, my fiancé's hand? What are we? Either way, I don't want her seeing him wandering down the back of my jeans.

As everyone at school says—it's complicated.

I pull away, breathless. "What did you want to ask me?" I watch as he moves. He's dropping down onto one knee. Now, he's slipping something from his pocket.

"If you like this or now." He flips open the lid of a small black jewelry box, exposing a silver ring with a green turquoise oval in its center. "It's just for now. I wasn't sure what kind of ring girls your age like, but we'll replace it with whatever you like."

It's unique and special and gorgeous. Instantly, I want to hold it. I lift the ring from the box. "It's beautiful. I love it."

"Really? You do?" He stares up at me, smiling so hard his dimple shows.

"I do." I turn the ring, taking in every detail.

Blue and brown veins run through the stone. But what does it mean? It's not like a typical engagement ring—when a man opens a box to reveal a diamond, a woman knows his intentions.

He's clearly down on one knee, but nothing is obvious when it comes to Haze.

Is this a gift? Or a step toward our future?

"I love it," I say. "But tell me more about what it means?"

There's a sense of urgency in his voice. "You told me to be a better man. Now I am.

I'm keeping my promise. I'm asking, not demanding." Then he answers my question: "Will you marry me?"

I stare down at the ring, knowing it holds the weight of my future. "Marry you..."

Suddenly, my stomach is a charm of hummingbirds and my knees are missing, and my legs are weak. I'm so drawn to him. I can't fight it.

Yet...

He felt familiar even at the earliest of our time together, like we were somehow connected. But how could that be? He's twice my age and comes from a completely different world than mine.

Yet again...

His beliefs about family and loyalty mirror my own, which is what matters most to me. Gazing at that alluring, always-bordering-on-naughty smile and into those dark, sparkling eyes ties my stomach in nervous knots of doubt and fills me with a profound longing for him...

For family, for us, for our forever...

And I want to say yes.

But that's wild. I'm only eighteen. I'm supposed to make rash decisions as a teenager, but this – to potentially give up my independence and take a husband – would be the craziest thing of all. I'm torn between the familiar safety of my lonely life and the potential for something more with him.

"What do you say," he pleads.

He's giving me the power, forcing me to make the choice.

Asking me to choose. To choose him. Not just for now.

Forever.

I stare into his eyes. And I want to say yes. Doubt creeps in.

He's a dangerous man. One who first demanded I marry him out of revenge. I could get hurt in so many ways.

Is it worth risking everything for... him?

CHAPTER 24

Haze

With a cobblestone digging into my kneecap, my heart in my throat, and my stomach in my ass, I stare up at her, and I beg, plead with the gods of fate that brought us here today to make her say that one little word.

“What do you say?” I ask.

She stares down at me, deep in thought. Finally, she says one little word.

But it’s not the one I want to hear.

“Why?” She blinks. Twice.

“Why, what?” I say.

“Why do you want to marry me?” she asks.

She’s the first thing I think about when I wake up. The final thing on my mind as I drift off to sleep. I love the way she feels, smells, sounds, and tastes. She’s beautiful and strong and intelligent and kind.

“I need you. I want you. I’m obsessed with you.” I rack my mind, thinking of what she might want to hear, what words I can say to convince her. “I’ll take care of you. Protect you. Spoil you. You’ll want for nothing.”

I wait, and my breath tightens my chest.

“And—I’ll try not to be—grumpy.”

Her blue eyes sparkle. “And I can call you my little sunny bunny?”

“Never.” I can see she’s softening... That dirty four-letter word, hope, burns bright in my chest. This time, I don’t fear it. I lean into the feeling. “Please, say yes.”

She doesn’t say anything back. She only stares down at me, biting her lower lip.

“The wedding that’s set up in the ballroom, that’s for us. When Gian and I planned this trip, I thought, why not get married while we’re here? I mean—if you agreed, of course. But why wait? This castle is a part of your past—I thought there’s no better place to start your future.” I grab her hands in mine. “Our future.”

Finally, she slips the ring on her finger.

Yes!

My heart races with excitement as a beautiful smile comes to her lips. The weight of the moment dissolves in the air. She put the ring on her finger. This is it. She’s going to promise to be mine.

Then she speaks and her words pierce through me like icicles.

“I’ll wear the ring,” she says. Her eyes meet mine. “But that’s all I can promise you.”

My world shatters into a million pieces in an instant. All my hopes crumbling. My chest tightens, and I struggle to catch my breath. “What?”

“I’m so sorry,” she says with a shake of her head. “I need some time. I don’t take the decision lightly.”

I stand, grabbing her hands in mine. “What do I need to do to convince you?” I plead, my voice barely above a whisper.

"I love the ring. I love..." her words trail away and her blue eyes turn away from me. "I love the ring, and I just need time to think."

“Right.” I feel like a fool, standing there with nothing but the promise of her wearing a ring that holds no actual meaning. I drop her hands.

It's all my fault.

I took her from her home and her family and forced her into this life with me.

And now I’m left feeling ashamed and broken that she won’t commit to me? What did I expect? My mind fills with fear and self-doubt.

Will she ever want to marry me?

Without her, I have nothing.

Before her, that wasn’t true, but now, the Bachmans won’t be enough for me; I know this. Will she ask to leave? Will she want to return to her family?

“Haze. I’m sorry I can’t give you a better answer right now.” Sensing me spiraling, she touches my shoulder, drawing back my attention. “But I didn’t say no. I said I need time.”

She needs time.

How do I give her the one thing she wants when I want to be with her every waking second? I run a hand through my hair. If time is what she needs, I should leave for a few days at least.

I don't think I can take being here with her and not being all over her.

Finally, I nod. "You're right. Time. Of course." I pull her close and kiss her. Then, I let her go.

She smiles weakly. "I've got to go talk to Freya. I need to fill her in and let her know?—"

She doesn't rub salt into the wound. We both know she's going to cancel the wedding Gian and I had set up. She doesn't have to say it.

I watch her walk away, admiring her strength.

I need to get out of here. I can't be around her. I'd throw her over my shoulder and drag her to a priest, forcing her to marry me against her will. Instead, I know where I need to go and what I need to do. I leave her a note, telling her I'll be gone for a few days to see my family.

I'm halfway in the back seat of the car that will take me to the airport when she comes running out of the castle, her long dark hair flowing behind her. "Wait!" she calls. I straighten up, standing by the car to wait for her.

Has she changed her mind?

She grabs my arm, pulling me in. "Take me with you. I want to meet your family."

"No." I shake my head. "It's not safe for you there. Stay here."

She stares up at me. “Is this because I said no to your proposal for now? Is that why you’re not taking me?”

I’m not sure what to say, so I say, “No.”

“Is this like some kind of break?” Her brow furrows at me.

“I don’t do breaks.” I sweep in to kiss her lips. “Not with you.”

“Good.” She wraps her arms around my neck. “I am a little behind on schoolwork with this last-minute trip and all. Think I can talk Gian into some more tutoring help?”

My heart pulls toward her. I want to stay. I want to be the one teaching her French. Practicing our French kissing...

As if reading my mind, she stands on her tiptoes, stretching up toward me for more kisses.

Fucking. Adorable. How can I leave?

I pull her in tight.

She wants space. I want her. The need to control her bubbles up with heat and ferocity, like lava from an erupting volcano. I can’t make her marry me. I can only wait for her decision.

But I can punish her.

“Don’t touch yourself while I’m gone,” I say. “That pussy belongs to me.”

“Seriously?” Exasperated with me, her arms drop from my neck. “When you say things like that—these are the things you say that have me questioning you?—”

“Question me all you want. This is who I am.” I cut off her words, grabbing her pussy.

She gasps as I squeeze her in my palm. “Stop.”

But I don’t, instead, holding her. “Mine,” I say. “Got that?” I kiss her again, this time harder, swiping my tongue against hers. She melts against me, momentarily giving in to my kiss. Too soon, she pulls away.

She turns on her heel, leaving me without saying goodbye.

I want to pull her back, argue with her, hold her, anything.

I can’t. I have a plane to catch.

And she needs time.

I let her go.

The flight to New York turns my stomach in knots. Not only am I doing something that will put me on seriously thin ice with Liam, but I’m facing my mom for the first time since I left. And meeting my brother for the first time.

CHAPTER 25

Haze

I rent a cheap car that will fit in around my old stomping grounds, the government-funded housing the rest of the Bronx calls the projects. Living here is what led me to becoming a builder. A neighbor who ran a framing crew offered me a job one day and I kinda fell into things.

He'd be shocked if he saw me now—flying helicopters to private islands to build futuristic buildings we never could have dreamed of living in back then.

I pass his place as I head to Mom's. Too soon, I'm standing at the red door with its peeling paint and crooked numbers. One number plate is missing.

The address is technically 1134, but it only contains two ones and a three. Her name, Sharon Harden, is etched into a gold nameplate I created as a Mother's Day gift some time ago when I lived here.

She knows I'm coming since I called ahead, so I let myself in. Holding that brass doorknob in my hand, memories come rushing back. Too many bad ones for me to want to be here right now. I swallow the tightness from my throat and open the door.

The first thing that hits me is how dimly lit she keeps the house and the familiar scent of mothballs and dust and Pall Malls.

Clearly expecting me, Mom sits on her worn plaid couch, one long, shapely leg

crossed over the other. A ladder creeps up her sheer black tights. An unlit cigarette is between her fingers, and her red nail polish is chipping. Her hair is bleached and broken at its tortured ends.

To this day, I can't hold a conversation with a woman who has a bad platinum dye job and not itch to walk away.

She wears the same outfit she wore to court so many years ago. A black turtleneck, a black and red patterned blazer with a matching skirt that was too short for court. Scuffed black pumps on her feet.

If you think this is a coincidence, you're a fool. There are no flukes in my mother's world. She's as sharp as the tip of a poisoned arrow.

She doesn't believe in fate. She is the hand of fate.

She knew I'd come here eventually, and she saved this outfit for that moment. It's a manipulation tactic. She chose this outfit for me, for this day that we finally see one another again, and it works.

Memories flood my mind. I smell the dry, stuffy air of the courtroom. I hear the quiet whispers, a cough, and the shuffle of feet as we await the verdict. I see the jury filing in, one by one, until twelve worn leather seats are filled. My stomach knots, and a weight like a stone settles between my hip bones.

She wore this outfit the day I testified to her innocence.

The day that, over two hours of questioning, I not only committed perjury, I ultimately betrayed my father.

I'm not here to avenge him.

For so long, I've hated my mother in a singular, solitary way, thinking of her as an unattached being who exists solely on her own. Hating her from afar. A hazy figure, like a hologram, would appear in my mind as I imagined her death. Only—as I stand before her—I realize how foolish I was to think I would be capable of killing her.

“Hello, Mom.” I cringe, the word sounding foreign and pathetic all at once.

You'll always be your mother's child, no matter how old you are.

I cut to the chase. “I found out I have a brother. I've come to meet him.”

“What?” She gasps in fake shock. “You mean you didn't come here to visit your dear mother? I get it—of course, you want to meet him. Everyone loves him. The kid is golden. Nothing like his dad, Billy Brooks. What a deadbeat.”

Deadbeat.

Hearing her say the phrase again, I cringe, remembering her using the exact words about my own father.

The words catapult from me. “Did you kill him, too?”

She gives a dry hack of a laugh.

“Did you?” I ask, realizing if she killed my dad, she could have easily destroyed his, too. There was nothing in that file about his father.

She waves her hand through the air, dismissing her guilt. “You know I was found innocent. Those charges were dropped.”

“How could I forget?” The words taste metallic on my tongue.

“You were a convincing little actor.” Her gaze narrows. “I never thanked you for that.”

I’ll stop hating myself for what I did long before I get a word of gratitude from her. And I’ll never stop hating myself. Yes, she’s a master manipulator, whispering in my ear, telling me she killed my father in self-defense, and she was in a position of power over me.

Still, ultimately, I’m the one who robbed my father of the justice he deserved.

I’m loyal to the core. He was already gone. I couldn’t put my mom behind bars for life as well. I knew no matter how terrible she was to him, Dad would not have wanted that.

Family is family.

Now, seeing her still as bitter and vindictive as she was the day I last saw her, I’m thinking maybe I should have told the cops the truth and had her locked up. Especially now that I know she’s gone on to procreate.

“Seriously, though,” I say, “I know it’s only the one kid”— Thank God— “but how many more ex-husbands have you accumulated since I last saw you?”

She grins. “Just the two.”

“Two?” I try not to look surprised.

“Yes. Two. Billy Brooks, who fathered your brother. Half-brother, I guess you’d say, even though he’s your damn spitting image?—”

I stand there, absorbing her words and feeling dizzy. I have a brother. And he looks

like me.

She tosses her stiff hair over her shoulder, and I tune back in as she says, “And we have my most recent marriage to a pawn shop owner named Falcon, which only lasted a little while. He has a daughter, Cleopatra, from a previous marriage, so you had a stepsister there for a moment, but you just missed her. They moved out on Thanksgiving.”

I quickly calculate, making sure I’ve got no responsibility to the girl, blood or otherwise.

The unlit cigarette is still between her fingers as she flips her hand through the air. “Just signed the divorce papers last month.”

“Better divorce than death,” I say. “I’m glad they both made it out alive.”

“Aren’t you funny? Yes, tragically, we lost your father, but both my current exes are alive and well.” She gives a dramatic sigh. “Unfortunately. There are bills to pay, and child support only goes so far for Blaze. Life insurance was such a nice chunk of change.”

I cringe. My heart squeezes, a pain zinging through my chest. I always did wonder if she killed my dad for the money. I guess I don’t have to wonder anymore.

There’s a glint in her eyes. A hardness there. An anger. For my father, or for me?

“You know I have a distasteful sense of humor,” she says. “I joke, but jokes don’t kill. I didn’t murder your father. I tried to tell you that, but you never believed me.”

“I honestly don’t know when you’re kidding. I think you killed him, then forced me to testify on your behalf. And now, after mentioning life insurance, something most

people don't joke about, you've got me thinking you did it all for money." Poison drips from my words. "How much was Dad worth to you dead?"

"Sit," she says, patting the open seat beside her.

I stay where I am, shoving my hands in my pockets. "I'm good standing."

She briefly eyes me before changing the subject, "So, where have you been all these years? It's like you fell off the face of the earth."

I'm aware I sound like a petulant child. "Not like you were looking."

She surprises me, saying, "I did. I even hired a private investigator to find you. He had no luck."

She was looking for me.

My throat tightens. A bit of that childhood desperation to be loved sneaks up on me. No matter how old you get, it never goes away, does it?

I swallow it back down.

"Yeah. It's been a minute," I say. Don't ask. Don't be pathetic. Don't ask. "So..." I clear my throat again. "You looked for me?"

"Yeah. No luck, though. Two-hundred dollars, and all he came up with was some cockamamie story about—get this—" She does that laugh again and flips her hair, but in its damaged state, it barely moves. "He gave me some story about you joining the mafia, of all things!"

"I moved to Italy," I offer.

“Oh! That explains the tall tale. There was no way his cheap ass was going to make it across the world to track you down. I guess everyone stereotypes Italians as mafia—like they do us New Yorkers.” She laughs.

Having been part of a mafia in both places, I only shrug. “Why were you looking for me anyway?”

She shrugs. “Can’t a mom worry about her child?”

“I guess an old dog can learn new tricks.” Was that disrespectful?

“Ha! You call your mother a dog? I’ll match your saying with another one. Apples don’t fall far from the tree.” She stands, moving across the room to examine me. “You still have my nose and your father’s bad attitude.”

Wanting to move away, I hold my ground.

“You look the same.” Her gaze narrows. “A little older. Is that gray by your temple.”

She goes to reach for my face.

I step back.

She laughs. “Jumpy.”

“More like keeping my distance,” I say. “I am standing across from the woman who murdered my father.”

I’ve never said the words out loud, making the accusation directly. She freezes, her hand hanging, still reaching out as if to touch me. She snaps her hand back, and it drops to her side. The statement hangs between us, sucking the air from the room.

“Funny. You’re funny.” She turns so I can’t see her face, returning and settling herself in her dip on the couch. Finally, her eyes settle on mine. “You’re funny, but you’re wrong.”

“About what?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I didn’t kill your father.”

“How can I believe you?” I demand.

“You were young. The state wanted someone to blame. They put all kinds of thoughts in your head before you testified.” She smiles. “But you stayed loyal, and I thank you for that.” I wait, needing to hear more, wanting nothing to do with it. Finally, she says, “I didn’t kill him, Harrison. It was an accident. Truly. And I’m sorry.”

The details of that day are hazy. It was so long ago, and I will never truly know the truth. I find myself void of energy to deal with the past any longer.

I simply say, “Okay, Mom.”

She’s less confident than I ever remember her being. She’s fiddling with the cuff of her sleeve as she says, “I’m doing it better this time around. He’s got proper meals, and I’m working two jobs to pay for his sports. I’m working hard at it?—”

“Hard at what?” I ask.

She says, “Being a mom to your brother.”

The sound of the front door opening grabs our attention.

She stands back up, saying, “Speak of the devil and he shall appear.” She tosses the

unlit cigarette into her pocket.

I turn to the door. What I see causes my breath to whoosh out of my chest. All the blood in my veins rushes to my head at once.

The doorway of my mother's apartment has become a time warp, some kind of funhouse mirror showing me an alternative version of... me. I'm staring at a much younger, slightly better-looking version of myself. Tall and broad, he has dark hair like mine, more wavy than curly, but he must have his father's green eyes.

"Yes, Mother, it's me. Your son, Lucifer." He grins, a dimple appearing on his cheek, a mirror to my own, and I'm confident he smiles much more than I do. "Though Ms. Enid called me an angel for raking her leaves for her last week."

"Harrison," Mom says, "this is my son, Blaze."

"Haze and Blaze," I mutter, still stunned by the presence of my brother standing before me in the flesh.

She laughs. "I wanted a more respectable name. Something like Ascot or Wolfgang. At the time, his father was into arson, so here we have Blaze."

"Not true. Mother's attempt at a joke." Blaze turns to me, explaining, "My father was into gambling. If I was a betting man myself, I'd put money down you could guess the horse's name that won him some money."

"Blaze," I offer.

"Correct." The young man reaches out to shake my hand. "Blaze Brooks. A pleasure to meet you, Harrison." He eyes me, curious. "And you are?"

“I’m...”

There’s no denying that the young man in her house is my flesh and blood. I can’t stop the protective energy that shoots through my chest. I can’t leave him here. But he seems clear-eyed. Happy. Is it fair to come in here like this? Dump this information on him? Then demand he come with me, a stranger, and have him leave everything he’s ever known?

Just like I did to Ophelia...

My revenge was foolishness. I should have left Ophelia alone. Now, my vengeance for my father’s legacy would be to take Blaze with me. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

I take one long, last look at my only sibling in this world and say, “I’m no one. I used to live here.... Was passing by and wanted a peek.”

He gives me a quizzical look. “Cool.”

I shake my head. “I was just leaving. Sorry I interrupted your day.” I move to the door.

My shoulder is inches from his, almost brushing against him as I go to leave.

He gives an easy, “Alright, man. Take care!”

And I’m forgotten.

I hold the knob, open the door, and give one final glance over my shoulder before I leave. He moves to Mom, leaning over her to plant a quick “hello” kiss on her cheek.

“Ma, you got any of that wedding soup left from last night?” he asks her. “I’m starving.”

And just like that, I’m dismissed from their world.

I leave, closing the door behind me. I drive back to my hotel in a bewildered state. A million questions come over me, including:

Why did I leave without telling him who I am?

I didn’t want to ruin him like I did Ophelia.

My mom is not the only one who can destroy people.

As she said, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I rent a cheap room at the hotel where I lost my virginity, a drunken, fumbling escapade with a girl whose name I no longer remember. I collapse onto the bed and pull my phone from my pocket.

I call her new cell number, the one for the Bachman phone I gave her when we left the Villa on our trip to Scotland. An eggplant-purple thing with a glittering case that Eros’s sister assured me a “girl Ophelia’s age” would love.

She did.

Ophelia picks up on the first ring. “There you are! I’ve been dying to hear from you. I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye. How are things?”

You denied my proposal. I’m halfway across the world. I didn’t even introduce myself to my brother. And didn’t press my mom for the full truth about my father.

So, the answer to your question is that things are going terribly.

Things are totally. Completely. Out of my control.

Needing to gain some of my power back, I turn all my heated attention on her, growling into the phone, “Did you touch that pretty pussy, baby?”

“Maybe.” She gives a shy excuse. “It got a little lonely here in the castle without you.”

God, she even sounds sexy. I reach down, rubbing my already hardening crotch. “Then you’ll have to be punished, naughty girl.”

“Punished? Pff.” She laughs. “What can you do over the phone?”

She has no idea the reach of a Bachman man, but she soon will when she sees what I have waiting for her. “You know I can reach you from anywhere. Anytime. You’re all mine now, little wifey. And always will be.”

“Wife-to-be,” she haughtily corrects. “Kind of.”

“I might make you say your vows over this phone now.” She’s denied my proposal. Does she need to remind me that she’s taken away my control? It’s time I demanded it back. “I’m teasing about the vows,” I say. “But one thing I’ll never joke about?”

“What?” Her question is a breathy whisper.

“Punishing you.”

CHAPTER 26

Ophelia

I stand before the mirror, wearing precisely what he's instructed me to. Two articles of clothing. They amount to almost nothing.

The underwire bra is made of pale lace, except where the full cups should be, there are only quarter-cups, my nipples on full display, a blue elasticized band running from the middle of my shoulders down to the inside corner of the wire on both sides.

And I wear black lace high-rise panties. Only these are like no other underwear I've ever seen, much less worn. Where the interior cotton gusset should be, there's nothing. There is no crotch in these panties. Instead, the lacy fabric runs along my outer labia.

I'm barefoot and pretty much nude.

My hair is pulled up into a high ponytail. I've been told I might get sweaty.

My punishment for touching my own body.

Submission. Control. Dominance.

The words echo in my mind as I stare at my obedient reflection. Why do I always let him have this control over me? Why don't I tell him no? Demand a car and go home? He's not here to stop me.

But the truth is, I don't want to leave. I want to be with him, to give myself entirely to him. When he first demanded marriage, he needed something from me and wasn't willing to take no for an answer.

But now, he's asking me to marry him.

Why didn't I do the sensible thing and say not just no for now, but no, never?

The answer comes to my heart before it can form in my mind. Even then, when he first stormed my bedroom, there was a part of me that wanted this connection with him, a piece of me that craved his touch and his dominance over me.

This began as a forced marriage. I didn't have a choice. Now, he's asking me for more—to be his wife in every sense of the word. And deep down, despite all the doubts, fears, and uncertainties that plague me, I want that, too.

I don't want to go home. I want him here with me.

A pinging sound comes from the video screen.

“You mustn't keep Mr. Dom waiting,” I murmur encouragingly, putting one foot in front of the other as I walk over the thick carpet to the remote on the desk. “You can get through this, whatever it is.”

My hands tremble as I approach the remote, and my heart races with a mix of fear and anticipation. I have no idea what he has planned for me, and the unknown is almost as terrifying as the thought of his punishment.

With each step, my doubts and nerves multiply, making me question if I should even go through with this. But I know I must face him; no matter how much it scares me, I won't back down.

As my fingers clumsily press the button with the white square, a loud whirring sound interrupts the silence around me. My eyes dart up toward the ceiling, where an intricate tray design catches my attention.

The squares within the tray are painted a calming blue, contrasting with the stark white molding. And then I see it—a video screen slowly descending from its hidden spot along the molding.

My heart sinks as I realize this was all part of his plan—using technology to control and punish me from afar. It feels cold to be alone with this screen. I want him. And I'm mad that he would do all this to prove a point, that he's in charge even when he's not here. A wave of conflicting emotions washes over me—anger at his manipulative tactics, fear of what's to come, and a strange sense of longing for his presence despite everything.

As I stare at the screen, I can't help but wonder what he has in store for me this time.

His voice comes through as the screen continues to lower into place. "A coffered ceiling," he says, "to improve the room's acoustics."

"How did you pull this off?" My words are whispers, but he manages to hear them from wherever he is.

The screen locks into place, still dark as his voice fills the room, asking me, "Was there a handyman at the castle today?"

"Yes. Callum," I say, picturing the massive man with the blond beard and stepladder slung over his shoulder. "But he looked more like a Viking than a handyman."

Haze says, "He's a friend of mine. He did me a few favors and made a few—enhancements—to this bedroom."

“Wait—he was in this room?” My skin prickles. I glance around me, feeling like I’m being watched.

“Yes, baby. And now you’ll see what additions I’ve made for you.”

The screen goes bright white, and then Haze appears. He has dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark soul. His look is pure lust—more for control than for me. His gaze lowers as he takes in this barely there outfit he’s made me wear.

He gives a lust-filled, “Phenomenal.”

Seeing his face makes me long for him to be here. To have him kiss and hold me. I want nothing more than for us to make up after that awkward parting when he left the castle. Where is he? I study the background but only find a standard hotel room.

Wanting to connect with him on a deeper emotional level, I ask, “How did it go with your family?—”

He holds a hand up to stop me. “No chat. All business. I can’t wait for you to see what I have for you. Go to the closet. There’s a special chair I’ve ordered from home.”

Home.

It’s strange to hear him say that word when there’s so much in limbo between us. His home? Or our home? I glance down at the beautiful ring on my finger, and staring at it only adds to my confusion.

As much as I hate biology, in this moment of anxiety, I long to be back there, by the cozy fire.

I go to the closet, bracing myself with a held breath. I throw open the doors. What. The. Heck. I just... stare.

And he watches it all from the video screen. Finally, I manage to say, “This is some kind of whacked-out Bachman Tech for sure. Is this what you men do with your time? Design torture devices for your women?”

He gives a dark laugh. “Roll it to the center of the room. Right in front of the screen. Where I have a front-row view of the action.”

It’s an office chair with a white cushy seat and back. However, the seat is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It features a white, silicone-looking plus sign, a long rectangle running vertically over the seat, and one horizontally, the material lined with small, raised bumps.

In the center is a dastardly thing.

A hot-pink silicone cock.

“Does it look familiar to you?” he asks. “Give it a good look.”

Leaning over, I look closer. Oh. God. I do know that cock. The thing is modeled after his own! I watch, partly in horror and partly in awe, as a clear shiny substance that looks a lot like lube begins to spew from the tip of the cock.

The lube runs over the sides of the dildo.

He says, “Have a seat, pretty lady.”

“No. I can’t.” I stare at the chair. If I do as he says, I’ll be stripped of the last remaining drops of dignity he’s left me with.

Yet...

“Yes, you can,” he growls.

I’m young. I am curious. The cool air hardens my nipples, the lace stretching over my skin as I move. The hunger in his gaze makes me want to see where this will go. And let’s be real—if I don’t do as he says, he’s going to make a fuss when he gets home.

Gripping the arms of the chair, I straddle the seat. The molded cock-thing looks up at me with its one now shiny eye. It’s remarkable how much it truly resembles his. Only this one is hot pink and made of silicone.

I move into position, legs parted, slightly squatting, hovering above it so my entrance is lined up with the toy’s head. The panties part with my labia as I squat, cold air teasing my entrance.

“Lower,” he demands.

My fingers tighten around the arms. My palms grow damp, my knuckles white. This is humiliating. I glance down; seeing how taut my nipples are only increases my shame. I lower myself, letting the slick top of the toy press against my opening.

“Lower,” he says again.

“Like this?” I ask.

“Lean forward more.”

I suck air between my teeth, hissing as I press on. Bending my knees, I lower myself onto the toy cock. I cry out as I attempt to sit. “Oh my god...” It’s firm, big like him, stretching my opening as it fills me. The pre-warmed lube helps. I keep going, inch

by inch, until it's fully inside of me, and I'm seated on the chair, my ass on the rubber base.

Which begins to warm beneath me.

I watch and feel in total shock as the rubber plus sign of the seat rises, forming around my body. The strip running back to front rises up over my clit and ass. The strip running right to left wraps around my hips.

The little raised dots of the silicone are massagers. The entire seat begins to vibrate. My ass, perineum, clit, every sensitive inch of my body is being manipulated by the gentle waves of vibrations. The dildo inside me begins to vibrate. Long, intense ripples are turning on and then off.

"This is crazy..." I've never felt anything so magical yet so overwhelming. Every inch of my body feels like it's vibrating. My eyes roll to the back of my head as my hips take over, rocking and bucking as my core tightens.

His voice commands from above. "Ride harder, or you're going over my lap when I get home."

I rock back and forth, screaming out, desperate for the orgasm this chair is forcing me to achieve.

"Get louder, or you're getting a taste of my belt," he demands.

He doesn't have to ask again as the first orgasm hits. Not much for foul language, a massive "Fuuuuck!" leaves my lips as the climax takes over, hard and strong and stealing my breath. The sky cracks open; white stars blind my eyes. I'm left shuddering and gasping, my fingernails digging into the leather arms of the chair.

My breathing becomes ragged as I feel my body being taken over by pleasure. I try to focus, to hold onto a sense of control, but it's difficult with every inch of my body being stimulated in such a way that I can feel another orgasm building rapidly.

I can't help but moan, the sound escaping my lips as the intensity of the sensations grows. My hands instinctively reach down, grazing over the vibrating silicone and dildo. I'm lost in a haze of pleasure, every muscle tense and ready to be released.

As the orgasm builds, I feel a sense of weightlessness. Time slows down as my body screams for release. And then, just as suddenly as it started, it comes crashing down on me, sending shivers of ecstasy through my entire body.

“God. Stop. Please.” I fall back against the chair, panting heavily as the aftershocks of my orgasm try to come, only to have another build.

“Good girl,” he moans. “How about a little more so I can watch your pretty face?”

“I can't take anymore,” I hiss.

I don't want any more. But the chair seems to sense that, and now the vibrations are gentle and less frequent. Purring, it draws a softer, quieter orgasm from me, like a cool-down period on a treadmill. Tingles travel throughout my body as I ease into the warm pleasure. Finally, I give my last shudder.

The chair powers down. The silicone folds lower. The strangest sensation happens inside me as I feel the cock sliding out of me, lowering down into the seat. Then, it's gone.

My body goes slack. My limbs feel weak, used, and spent. The warm, fluid feeling that comes with climax flows through me, but I'm left unfulfilled and unsatisfied. When he makes me come at home, I'm in his arms afterward. He strokes me, talks to

me, as I bask in the afterglow.

I can feel him staring at me from his god-like place on the video screen. I don't look up. He moans. "God, that was so sexy."

I hate the lust in his voice. I hate that this was all for show, for him. I like our sexy times together because I like the way they make me feel, yes, but my favorite part is the connection between us. Like I'm not all alone in this world. Like there's that one person that gets me. That I trust enough to let deep inside.

There is none of that in this.

I feel empty, alone, and lonely. I'm only fulfilled by him. I long for his arms, warmth, smell, and strength.

I want to scream and pound my fists. I want to tell him; how dare you make me miss you. Instead, I bury my face in my hands, and I cry.

When he speaks, his voice is filled with emotion in a way I've never heard him sound. "Oh my God. Ophelia! Are you hurt?"

I'm not hurt. Just a wee bit broken. I didn't know that sex could make you feel this way... empty and lonely and aching for something you want but you can't have.

I can't explain it. I feel silly and angry and desperately naive all at once. I don't answer. Like a baby, I just sit here with my head in my hands, sobbing.

My shoulders shake as I cry.

His voice comes back to me, the tones of concern soothing me. "Ophelia. What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Finally, my breaths calm me enough to speak. When I do, the words come out as a shaky whisper. “You said...”

“What did I say?” He pleads, “Tell me.”

“It was just a game for you. A sexy way to release some pressure. To gain control.”

To soothe his ego.

“Huh?” he begs, “Tell me when I said that?”

I shake my head. “You didn’t have to say it.”

I remember that night, the first time. That nagging doubt crept up in the back of my mind when I tried to decide whether or not to let him in when I let my heart win. I’m in way over my head with this man.

He told me I deserved more.

And I do.

For once, I do the right thing. I swallow back my fear and my doubts and I tell him what he needs to hear.

“You said you were going to be better. For me.” I shake my head, staring down at my trembling fingers as I whisper, “This isn’t what I deserve.”

“I’m so confused,” he says. “I thought you liked this kind of stuff. You liked the chair I had made for you in your room.”

Finally, I let my eyes lock with his. I’m hurt by the sadness in his gaze—such a

contrast to his earlier lust and greed. It softens me. Like it always does. He's my weakness.

"Tell me more," he pleads. "Make me understand."

"I can't help shake the feeling that all this—" I gesture around the room. "Was... I don't know. Your way of using me." I shake my head. "Not pleasing me." He's quiet, eyes trained on me, listening. His attentiveness gives me the strength to continue. "Sure, I came." I shrug, thinking of the overwhelming vibrations that rocked my body. "A lot. But I wasn't with you. And I missed you."

He runs his hands through his hair, staring off into the distance. "I thought..." Finally, he says, "You're right. I needed control."

I narrow my gaze, asking, "Why?"

He absorbs my words, facing his selfishness. "I had a long day. I felt... powerless. I used this—chair, this thing to gain some semblance of control."

"You didn't use the chair," I correct. "You used me."

"Oh, God. I didn't mean to, but I see how you'd feel that way." He looks away, shaking his head. "I'm a terrible man."

He's not a bad man. I want to reach out and grab his hand. "You're not."

"Ophelia. I'm so sorry. You're right. About everything." He flicks away a tear, hoping I don't see it.

I did.

The small gesture tugs at my heartstrings so hard, I almost stop him and tell him something that would shake his whole world.

I don't.

Finally, he gets up the courage to meet my eyes again. "You deserve so much better. For the first time in our relationship, I'm going to give it to you."

What does this mean? For him, for me, for us? The delicate promise between us to maybe, perhaps, one day...

I twist the ring on my finger. "What are you going to give me?"

"Keep the ring," he says. "It's yours. And whatever else you need. I'll give it all to you. I'll pay for your education and your housing. Your family's housing. You only have to do one thing."

Those deep, soulful eyes stare into mine.

Feeling numb, I ask, "What?"

His final words make my heart sink to my stomach.

He stares right at the screen. His words come as a command. "Leave me and never see me again."

Page 27

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:05 am

I hang up the call. The screen goes dark. I stand from the cheap hotel bed. Run my fingers through my hair.

At this rate, I'll be bald, tearing my hair out by the end of the year.

I need to call Liam and confess what I've done. Eros has my back; I know he's not told anyone about my detour from Inverness, Scotland, to New York. He'll leave it to me to face the music.

I have no idea what the consequences will be, but I know I'll face them with more courage than I showed today when I left my mom's house without telling my brother who I am. At least I was strong enough to do the right thing and let Ophelia go.

I pack my things to leave. The ringing of my phone stops me from grabbing my bag. Hope tugs in my chest as I look at the screen.

Is it her?

I recognize the number. It's not Ophelia. My heart sinks.

I have to clear my throat to answer. "Mom. What's up?" I lift my hand to my hair, then tell myself to lower it back down. I shove it in my pocket.

She dives right into the conversation. "Look, Harrison. I know I was a shitty mom?—"

"That's an understatement."

“Fine,” she sighs. “A really shitty mom. But I’ve had the chance to try again, and I am, Harrison, I am trying. I’m trying my scrawny little ass off.”

I choke back a laugh. As angry as I was at her, I always enjoyed her self-deprecating sense of humor. I say, “I thought you looked pretty good today.”

“Thanks. If you’re being sincere,” she says. “Anyway. I didn’t kill your dad. I know you don’t believe me. One day, I hope to explain the accident, but?—”

“Mom. It’s fine.” It’s not, not really, but I can’t take the pain in her voice. “And it looks like you’re doing pretty good with the kid. Though you really could have chosen a better name.”

She cackles into the phone. “That was all his father.”

“He seems like a good kid,” I offer.

“He is. And you should get to know him.” Her voice softens. “He always wanted a brother.”

Her words change something in me. “I did, too.”

“Come back to the house,” she says. “Get to know him.”

Ophelia is gone. I’m already going to pay for breaking the rules and coming here. She’s offering an olive branch. The right thing to do is to go back and meet with her and Blaze.

It’s too late to do it for Ophelia, but I will be a better man.

For me and for my brother.

I accept. “Okay. But don’t try to feed me any of that wedding soup.” I’m too depressed about Ophelia to eat anything even named after marriage.

She laughs, and then we arrange for me to come by on my way out of town. I hang up, glancing around the hotel room. I pack up the video screen on the dresser first, cringing at the memory of Ophelia’s tear-filled face.

I go to grab the plug from the wall. The screen lights up. I stop.

There’s only one person who would bring that screen to life.

“Ophelia?”

I sink back onto the bed, staring at her. She’s got her hair down and a hoodie on over that sexy bra I made her wear. “Haze.”

Do I hang up? Demand that she never speak to me again, beginning now? I have no desire to do either.

I’m no longer the one in control, and I don’t want to be.

I simply say, “Hi.”

She starts by taking a deep breath. “There’s something I need to tell you...”

“Go on,” I say.

“There’s this thing that’s been bubbling up and bubbling up, and I can’t ignore it any longer. And not having you here with me, it’s made me realize what I’m feeling. And I can’t keep it inside anymore.”

“Tell me.” I lean forward. “What is it?”

She heaves a sigh, then says three words that change everything. “I love you.”

Love.

The most dastardly four-letter-word of them all.

She says those words, and then, she waits.

Her words hang between us, heavy with meaning and expectation. The weight of her declaration rests heavily on me like a burden I’m not sure I can carry.

I’m obsessed with her. All I think about is her. Since she came into my life, the only thing I want, crave, and need...

Is her.

Ophelia has become my entire world.

Her voice gets quiet. And she asks me a dangerous question. “Do you love me?”

I lock onto her beautiful blue eyes, searching my icy soul for the words I’m unworthy of saying. Her expression brims with hope and vulnerability as she waits.

All she wants is three little words.

How do I tell her I’m not capable of giving her the pure, sweet love she deserves?

I offer a controlling, manic... maniac kind of love, needing every ounce of her to belong to me. My chest burns with self-loathing. I never, ever want to hurt her.

Her expression falters. I’ve waited too long to answer. I owe her this much; I owe her at least an answer.

Finally, I say, “You’re the only thing that matters to me anymore. But you deserve more.”

She sets her jaw. Her eyes narrow. Her gaze hardens.

“Then give it to me,” she challenges me. “I know you can.”

She’s constantly pushing me, demanding I be the man I say she needs. Can I be that man? I don’t know.

But maybe she does.

I trust her. Implicitly. I’ll tell her what I know; then, she can decide what kind of love she deserves.

I bare my soul to her, desperately hoping that even in my screwed-up state, I am enough.

I say, “You’re the first thing on my mind in the morning.” Desperation edges into my voice. “And that’s saying a lot because my mind is such a mess when I wake up. When I close my eyes at night, I see your face. I love everything about you. I want to be with you every moment of the day.” Wishing I could reach through the screen that divides us and hold her, I plead with her to understand. “I want you. I want all of you. Every perfect inch of you.”

She stares at me. “That is love, Haze.”

I allow her words to sink in. Can it be this simple? Everything I’m already feeling for her...

Is love.

She's right. She's always right.

We stare into one another's eyes. The understanding that passes between us changes everything; this moment defines our future. For the first time in forever, I feel joy.

And I say, "Ophelia, I love you."

In a moment, she goes from crying to laughing. Her blue eyes are wide and filled with happiness as she stares at me. "I know you do. I can feel it. I just needed you to know it."

"I can be pretty dense sometimes," I say.

"No," she laughs. "You're not. It's just good to hear you say you love me, too."

"Yeah. Thanks for being patient." To my shock and horror, tears creep into the corners of my eyes. Quickly, I brush them away. "I'll be there as soon as I can," I say. "Don't you move a muscle."

Her smile twitches. "And what happens if I move a muscle?"

"Then—" I smile back. "You know what? You do whatever the hell you want. Just please, please, be there when I get back," I beg. "Please."

"I'll see what I can do," she says. "But maybe if you repeat it, you'll convince me."

And I say the words she wants to hear, freeing myself from the chains of my past.

"I love you, you perfect, beautiful girl," I say. "I love you."

Ophelia

I stand in the church doorway, unable to tear my gaze away from my husband-to-be. He doesn't see me hiding in the wings where I can observe him while I wait for my musical cue to walk up the aisle to meet him. If you'd told me he could look more handsome, I'd have said it was a lie, but now, with him in his tailor-made tux and a happy smile on his face, I'm speechless at how handsome he looks.

I love him. It feels so good to say those words and hear him say them back. I love him, and I love that he had to have his brother beside him at the altar for this day. And his mother in the first pew, right beside mine.

Turns out forgiveness means more to him than revenge.

Ecstatic by our wedding plans, Liam quickly forgave Haze for breaking protocol and going to his family. Liam and Emilia personally extended the invitation to my mother-in-law—still getting used to that term—to our bachelorette party spa day. Her hair is a warm shade of honey that suits her skin tone, and they've made her up just enough to enhance her delicate bone structure. They have the same nose, her and him and his brother.

Blaze stands beside Harrison, my husband's younger, taller version. He's much closer to my age than Harrison and we enjoy playing games on the Play Station together while Harrison looks on, grumbling about us wasting our time and ruining our eyesight but he's the one to get up and ask Gian for more of his gourmet butter popcorn, so I don't think he minds it too much.

Blaze's uncomfortable in his fine black Armani suit, and he keeps reaching up to adjust his collar or tug at the tie Grandma probably tied too tightly.

I feel him, having traded in my joggers for a Luca Magliano gown, the lace itching my lower back where it dips low, just above my ass. The silky fabric sweeps over my body, hitting all the right places so I look elegant and sexy all at once.

I look amazing in this dress, so I'll deal with the discomfort.

This morning, I knew it was time to put my necklace back on. Now, I wear the three strands of pearls around my neck. Matching earrings adorn my earlobes, a family heirloom and an apology gift from Grandma.

Even as she still tried to tell me my dress was too revealing and improper to wear in a church. But now that we know she's the one who hacked into Haze's account and had two of her bridge buddies rob him in a park, Mom told her to turn her other cheek the other way and go take a seat in her pew.

Wait till Grandma sees my black graduation dress, made by the same Italian designer as the gown I wear today, modeled after Freya's asymmetrical one I loved so much. It's only got one sleeve, the bare skin showing well past my shoulder. She's going to flip.

Grandpa squeezes my arm. "That's us, Ophelia." He smiles at me.

"Thank goodness you were paying attention," I say, my stomach a flight of butterflies. "I would have missed it."

There's a Bachman-only ceremony later tonight, one I have no idea what to expect from, but Harrison reassures me I'll be fine. I'm a little shaky in this new world. There are so many people for me to meet, women in the family who want to get to know me, but it will all have to wait. I'm going to be very busy on my two-week sexcapade honeymoon, and no one better even think about interrupting us.

I'm here, finally. We've reached the altar. I give Grandpa my cheek to kiss. He pats my hand and goes to join the family in their pew. Haze takes my hands in his, looking so deep into my eyes that I'm sure he sees my soul.

"There you are." He squeezes my hands. "My bride. You look—" His eyes travel

from the sparkly tiara on my head to the pointy tips of my silver heels. “There aren’t words to do you justice.”

“Then just tell me you love me,” I whisper.

“I love you.” He smiles so deep, I see his dimple.

We go to kiss, and there’s a loud cough from the reverend, stopping us.

Whoops!

“Umm... we’re going to save that for later, you two. I’m sensing the groom is eager to kiss his bride.” He addresses the congregation. “Should we get started, folks?”

A quiet laugh rumbles through the crowd.

Hand in hand, we make our vows. Not vows of vengeance. Instead, we vow to love one another.

Forever.

The end