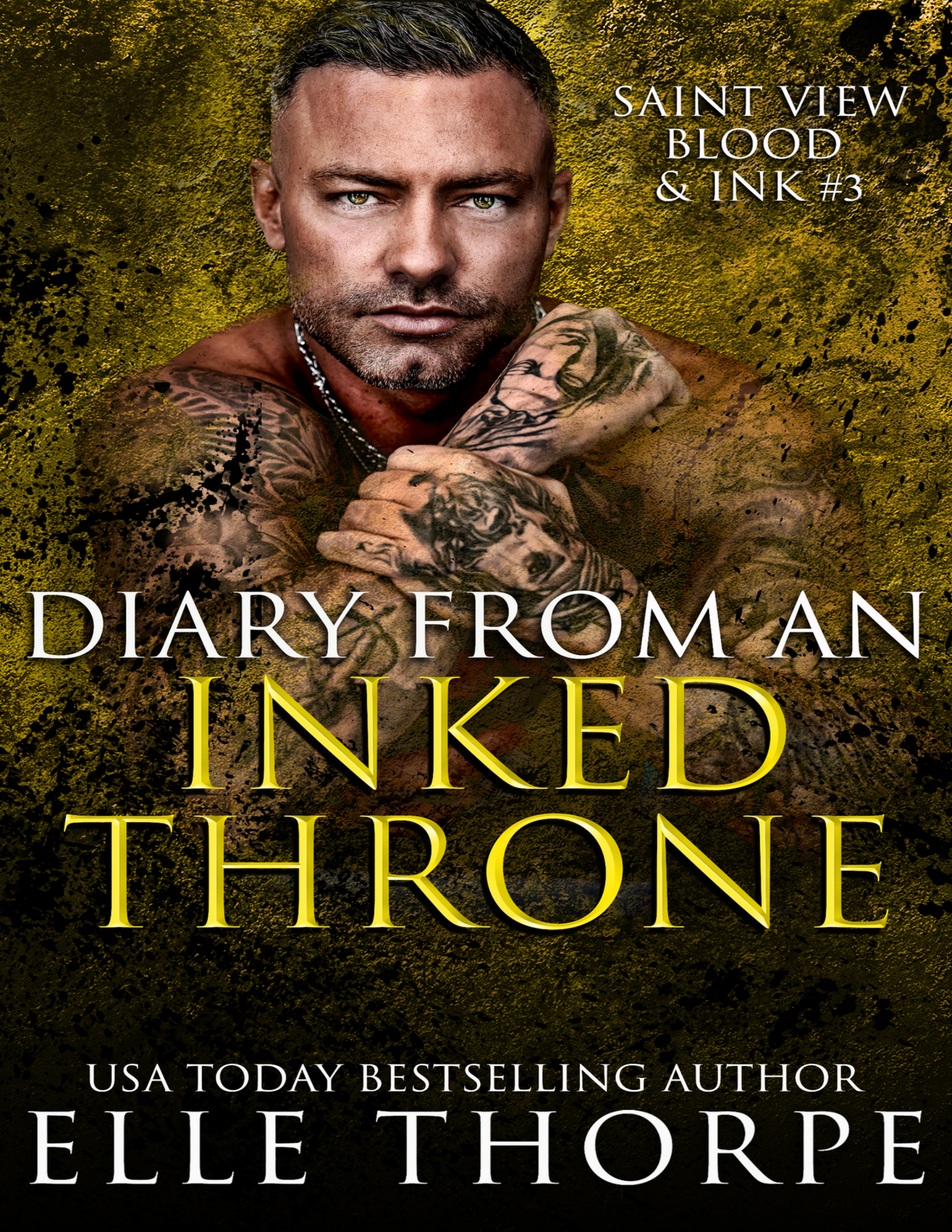

SAINT VIEW
BLOOD
& INK #3
DIARY FROM AN
INKED
THRONE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ELLE THORPE

DIARY FROM AN INKED THRONE

SAINT VIEW BLOOD AND INK

BOOK 3

ELLE THORPE

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VIM1

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To everyone who survived Diary of a Biker Queen.
I'm sorry.
No, wait.
I'm really not.

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1

NYAH

Dear Diary,
Here's a wedding tip. If your groom gets shot, don't assume the ceremony is over.

I doubted anyone dreamed of a wedding day where the groom is shot in the middle of the I dos.

Not just once either, but four times, his blood spilling across your virgin-white shoes and staining them crimson.

I doubted, even in a dream, you would stand there shell-shocked and screaming, while the groom's brother stepped forward, took his place, and claimed the wedding would go ahead.

Despite being the one who unloaded his gun into his own flesh and blood.

All while an entire congregation of Mafia families watch on with their mouths hanging open.

A sharp pain ripped through my belly, and I doubled over, clutching my baby, still growing deep inside me and hopefully oblivious to the nightmare his mother's life had just become.

Enzo slapped me so hard across the cheek my head snapped to one side. It had the desired effect, cutting off my screams, and when I straightened, I

made sure there was nothing but cold, hard venom in my eyes.

Agreeing to marry Carlos so this baby was safe and protected from a world that would hunt us down was one thing.

Agreeing to marry Luca's cold-hearted uncle Enzo, Carlos's brother?

Over my dead body.

Something in Carlos had been redeemable. When he'd come to me with his heart on his sleeve, grieving the loss of his only son, truly mourning him, I had felt a tiny sliver of sympathy. I'd felt the sincerity in his words when he'd begged me to give him another chance at being a father.

With Luca, Dax, and Lynx all gone, I'd agreed.

It was either that or take my baby, run, and look over my shoulder for the rest of my life. To hide, like Luca and his younger sister, Isabella, had done, only to be dragged back into it all at one snap of Carlos's fingers.

No, it had been better to marry Carlos. To take him at his word that he wouldn't touch me, and my child would grow up safe and protected.

Marrying Enzo was none of that and never would be.

Enzo's eyes were so dark they were black. His pupils blown with the excitement and adrenaline of ending his brother's life so brutally and stepping into his shoes without even taking a breath in between.

He waved a hand impatiently in the stunned priest's face. "Say the words."

The priest shook his head, clutching his Bible to his chest. "This is most improper—"

I almost laughed. Improper? Was he for real? This was a bit more than improper. I fought not to slip as Carlos's blood ran in rivulets down the altar steps. Was I supposed to toe his dead body out of the way so we could continue the ceremony, substitute groom in place?

Enzo grabbed my hand so sharply I screamed, sure something in my wrist was going to break.

He smiled at my whimper.

An equally sharp pain splintered through my belly again. I'd never had a baby before, so I didn't know what a contraction felt like, but I suspected I was about to get a crash course.

Could watching a man die right in front of you, hearing his gurgled breaths as he choked on his own blood, force you into labor? I had no idea. But I moaned, wishing my muscle and bone could protect my baby from the evil that was the man standing in front of me.

“Get to the I dos,” Enzo snapped. “I Enzo Guerra, take her. Whatever.”

Her. Like I wasn’t even worthy of him remembering my name.

“I’m not marrying you,” I spat at him when the pain eased. “I’m in labor. I need to go to the hospital.”

I wasn’t even one-hundred-percent sure that was true, but the two pains I’d had, close together, definitely made it seem that way.

“You’re a liar. Say your vows.”

I wouldn’t. “No.”

His eyes narrowed, and he twisted my arm another inch. “Say your vows, Nyah, or we’ll stand here until you do. Even if it means that baby drops out of your cunt right here, right now.”

I stared at him in horror, wondering how someone who was once an innocent baby himself could grow to be so cruel.

Anything I said to him now wouldn’t be legally binding. All the paperwork had been filed with Carlos’s name, waiting only on signatures that now would never be. This part, the standing here in front of Carlos’s friends and my family, was just a performance.

But I knew it didn’t matter. All that mattered to Enzo, to my father, to every man and woman in this room, was I belonged to Enzo in their eyes. If I said I do, while I was standing here in front of them all, I was his wife.

And this baby, his son.

Every face in the crowded church stared at me, most familiar, but none of them on my side. They were Carlos’s community. His men. Associates. Family. Their women and kids. Generations of Mafia that my parents had wanted to be a part of so badly they’d been willing to sell their only daughter.

For the first time since I’d walked up the church stairs, I wished I’d invited my friends. Violet. Amber. Reaper, and the other guys at the Slayers MC. But none of them would have supported my decision to marry Carlos, so I hadn’t.

And now I was on my own.

I looked over at my parents sitting in the front row, pleading with them with my eyes to help me.

My mother turned away.

Oddly, it was my father who cleared his throat. “Enzo, please. She needs a hospital.”

He scoffed in his direction, “Your daughter is as big a liar as you are.”

My dad’s cheeks went red with embarrassment, but I only saw it for a second before another wave of pain hit me. This time I couldn’t control the deep, guttural moan that slipped from my mouth. I leaned hard on Enzo’s arm, needing something to support myself on.

His voice became a murderous hiss. “Stand up and say your vows, you lying whore. You can be my wife, or you can be dead. Make your choice.”

I couldn’t talk. Could barely breathe.

But as the pain passed, the words came in sure, unrelenting sentences. “Kill me then. Because I’d rather die than be your wife.”

And I meant it. Every. Single. Word.

This baby would not grow up with Enzo as his father.

Rage mottled Enzo’s face, and I knew I’d surprised him. His finger hovered over the trigger; the barrel of his gun pressed to my chest. His teeth ground against each other. “Say your vows.”

I cocked my head to one side, studying him. “You can’t kill me, can you? Why? Your brother and nephew are dead. If me and the baby are dead, you’re the next male heir. Everything is yours. So why not kill me?”

I was sure this was not the smartest way to spend my last few minutes on this earth, but I had nothing left to fight for. The three men I loved were gone. My family had more than proven I was nothing but a pawn in their game, a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. And my baby would come with me, safer in death than he could ever be in this life.

It wasn’t what I wanted.

But it was better than the alternative.

Enzo gave a slow shake of his head, his voice low enough now so only I heard. “You’re as stupid as I thought. You think you’re so clever, with your knowledge of succession. But you know nothing. Without a male heir in my brother’s line, everything falls to Isabella.”

It was like someone had dumped cold water over me. I hadn’t even considered it. I’d grown up a Mafia brat, but I had so many brothers, and women were treated like such second-rate citizens, I’d never even considered a woman could inherit an empire like the Guerras had.

What a crown that would be to wear.

And one that would put a target right on your back.

Luca’s little sister had done nothing wrong but be born into the miserable fucking family. She was barely more than a child, but she was here on this earth. A flesh-and-blood human. One I knew in my heart

needed protection. “Don’t you fucking touch her,” I growled at him, suddenly sure she was his next target.

It was one thing for me to sacrifice myself and the baby inside me. Those were my decisions to make.

I could not condemn Isabella to the same fate. “If you kill her—”

He laughed in my face. “Oh, trust me, I would if it would get me anywhere. Already thought of that. There’s no point in me killing her. If she’s dead, everything goes to her husband. The Guerra name dies.”

Isabella was still married to one of Carlos’s friends. Even though she’d fled and was currently hiding with the Slayers, their marriage was still binding in the eyes of both the law and the community.

I gaped at him, all the pieces finally fitting together. “You can’t inherit anything without my child. If we’re married, you’re his stepfather…”

“And I’ll control everything until he’s eighteen.” Enzo grinned at me. “You’re finally catching on. I sure as shit hope your son is smarter than you are. Now say your fucking vows.” He dragged the gun up my neck and held it beneath my chin, his voice dropping to a sugar-sweet tone sure to poison if you were stupid enough to try a bite. “Because I know what’s worse than your death, Nyah.” He brushed his lips over my ear, his hot breath making my skin crawl. “Letting you live, just long enough to deliver me a son, and *then* ending you. You’ll die knowing I’m his only role model.” His voice turned singsong. “And he’ll grow up, just…like…me.”

Horror rushed through me.

He was right.

The only thing worse than me dying right now and taking my baby with me would be dying and knowing I was leaving my only child in the hands of a monster.

“I do,” I whispered through the pain of another contraction.

Enzo smiled victoriously, his pleasure at breaking me written all over his smug face. He turned to the priest. “Continue.”

I didn’t hear the rest of the ceremony. Only registered that it was fast and nobody asked me another word. My contractions continued the entire time, but I was almost too numb to feel them.

The men and women who sat in the pews clapped politely as the priest announced us man and wife.

My father grimaced, but he was the only person there who seemed even remotely bothered.

The priest cleared his throat. “You may now kiss your bride.”

Enzo leered at me, hauling me closer against his chest. “Kiss your husband, Mama.”

He smashed his lips against mine, his disgusting tongue prodding at my mouth that refused to move to allow him entrance. I tried not to breathe in the scent of him, tried not to feel or hear or remember any of it. The pain of my labor only added to the worst moment of my life, one I didn’t seem able to escape from.

Enzo pulled back, his laughter at my expense cruel. He dragged me down the blood-red altar steps and along the aisle toward the open door. In the distance, sirens wailed.

But I knew the phone call to the police hadn’t come from someone inside the church. That wasn’t how this world worked. If the police bothered to question any of these people about the murdered man lying dead in front of them, they wouldn’t say a word.

Enzo stopped at the doorway to the church and spun us back to the crowd who had stood to follow us out. “Would love to stay and celebrate with you all, but apparently it’s time for me to meet my son.”

A cheer rose around us, and tears pricked the backs of my eyes.

Just like I’d thought. It didn’t matter this baby didn’t have an ounce of Guerra blood running through its veins. All that mattered was what men in power decided was true.

Enzo dragged me out across the lawn to a waiting car and pushed me inside before rounding it to take the seat behind the wheel.

I wanted to yank the door open and run, but another contraction clouded my vision. I clutched my belly and tried to breathe deeply, pushing the pain away. But tears rolled down my cheeks, my sight blurring until Luca, Dax, and Lynx stood on the church steps, staring at me.

And my heart broke all over again.

Because only in this much pain, in my imagination, in a world that could never be, would the three of them ever be waiting outside a church for me.

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2

LUCA

THIRTY MINUTES EARLIER

Dear Diary,
Good news…my father died. Bad news…literally everything else.

You got to know a lot about someone when you were locked in a room with them for weeks on end.

For example, I now knew Dax's favorite color was green, that he'd played trumpet in his high school band, and his kindergarten teacher's name had either been Mrs. Jones-Buttersworth or Mrs. Buttersworth-Jones.

He had debated the order of her names for what had felt like three days. No one had stopped him because we didn't have anything better to do.

I also now knew Lynx had a scar on his back from the removal of a skin cancer in his teens, though the scar was so faded it had taken at least an hour for me to identify it in the weak, single bulb light that lit the room. His dad was one of seven kids, so he had a huge slew of cousins. And he'd grown up on Success Street, which he thought ironic since blacking out, murdering people, and going to prison was probably not anyone's idea of success.

Scruff grew thick on all three of our faces. Dax had been in here the longest, and his had filled out into a full beard. It suited him, as far as I could tell, though who knew what it would look like in the sunlight.

None of us had seen it in weeks.

“You smell about as bad as you would if you had actually died in that car fire,” Lynx said to me idly from where he was sprawled out on the stone floor, staring up at the dingy ceiling.

I twisted my head from my spot beside him. “What makes you think it’s me? You hardly smell like roses.”

Dax sighed from my other side, something in his neck audibly cracking. “I think it’s just the air down here now. The smell of us…and other things… is all just so rank I’ve forgotten what the fresh stuff is like.”

None of us looked over at the corner of the room where our captors had so politely given us a bucket to piss and shit in. Shame they didn’t change it regularly.

I couldn’t remember what the outdoors smelled like either.

But I did remember burying my face in Nyah’s neck and inhaling the sweet scent of her skin and hair.

So that’s what I held on to.

All we had was talk, and we’d talked about her a lot. The one thing we all had in common was how much it fucking hurt to be apart from her. To be worried about where she was and if she was safe. To be racked with guilt over her being alone, thinking we’d all abandoned her when she needed us most.

Every time I thought about any of it for too long, something inside me threatened to break.

Before it could, we changed the subject to generic stuff. First cars, first crushes, or first beers.

There were no conversations about goals or plans. None of us brought up the future.

None of us could see one anymore.

Bells chimed somewhere above our heads, and all three of us sat up, staring at the ceiling like we might be able to see through it if we stared hard enough.

“Must be Sunday,” Dax murmured.

The first week he and I had been here, we’d heard those bells, and the slow, rhythmic chiming had given us the idea we were being held in, or at least very close to, a church. From the cold stone floors, the constant damp, and the lack of natural light, we’d figured we had to be in a basement, and sometime before Lynx was tossed in here with us, we’d decided we were in

some sort of crypt beneath a church. Probably one in Providence or Saint View, because we both remembered not driving far after we'd been abducted.

Dax and I had screamed our lungs out every time we heard those bells.

But if there was a church congregation upstairs, worshipping the Lord, they couldn't hear us. Nobody came.

Except the guards, who only ever opened the door to point guns at us while they passed through food and water.

We still couldn't work out why they'd kept us alive this whole time, though none of us were hoping for death, so we didn't speculate on that too much.

The guards always covered their faces. They never spoke to us. I always had the feeling at least two of them sat outside at all times, guarding their prisoners, though we had no real proof of that except for overhearing the odd muffled conversation through the heavy door. We'd tried talking to them, but they never responded, even when we'd grown so sick of each other's childhood stories we'd resorted to asking the guards about theirs.

Fucking rude if you asked me. Seemed the least they could do was entertain us if they were going to keep us down here for the rest of our miserable lives. Which is what it felt like they were doing.

"Yo, guards!" I crawled over to the door, so I could hear them better. "Is it Sunday already?"

No one said anything. As expected.

I stared at the door. "I really hope you're not answering because you're busy making us a Sunday roast."

Dax groaned, his stomach grumbling loudly at just the thought of a decent meal. He called out a request of his own. "With gravy! The really thick kind, made with the fat that drips off the meat…"

Lynx punched his arm. "Stop. I'm drooling." He raised his voice so the guards would hear through the doors. "I want roast potatoes. And they better be really fucking crispy. If they're soggy, I'll be throwing them at your—"

A noise came from the other side of the door.

I shushed Lynx and twisted my head to press my ear to it.

He and Dax followed, the three of us straining to hear whatever was happening on the other side.

We did this every time we heard anything out there. The guards never said anything interesting, it was always just pleasantries as they changed shifts, or a few curt words to inform the other that we had or hadn't been fed. But it felt like the equivalent of your parents saying you could watch TV after depriving you of screentime all day. We listened at that door like the guards might put on a song-and-dance routine just for our entertainment.

Footsteps thundered on the stairs I remembered being dragged down after I'd been jumped on the street, the night I'd gone out to get Lynx and Nyah dinner. I hadn't been able to see a thing, courtesy of the bag shoved over my head, and my heart had thumped loudly as I'd tried to fight them off to no avail.

Every day since, and even more so after Lynx had been tossed in here with me and Dax, I wondered if Nyah would be next. If the next time I heard a struggle on the stairs, it would be her dark eyes I saw when the door opened.

I had no idea whether I wanted her here with us or not. On one hand, of course I didn't. On the other, fuck, I wanted her in my arms, where I could see for myself that she was okay.

I hated not knowing. The baby would be nearly due by now, surely.

And we'd left them both completely unprotected.

Every single day that had eaten away at my heart and my gut and my soul until it was all I could think about.

But all we could do was hope that the Slayers had her. I knew War would never kick her out, but I also knew our girl. And she was a spitfire. So I had no idea how long she would accept their charity before she tried to make it on her own.

She was strong and beautiful, but she had no idea what she was up against. If my father was willing to fake my death, lock us in here and throw away the key, he wouldn't think twice about hurting Nyah in whatever way he chose.

The rat bastard hadn't shown his face one time since I'd been brought down here.

If he was hurting her…

I squeezed my eyes shut, bile rolling in my stomach. I slammed the heel of my hand on the door, even though it was so solid it barely moved beneath my assault. "Is that my father out there? Did he finally grow

enough balls to confront me face-to-face like a man? If you've fucking touched one hair on her head, old man, I swear to God—"

Lynx clapped his hand over my mouth and hissed in my ear. "Shut up! They're talking."

I shoved him off me, mostly because he really did stink but also because he was right and I wanted to hear whatever they were saying.

"…It doesn't matter anymore. There's a whole church full of people up there watching Nyah marry Carlos. As soon as the ceremony is over, we no longer need them. Kill them."

If it were even possible for a silence to fall over an already soundless room, it happened. There was no noise except for the blood rushing in my ears. I didn't breathe. I was sure my heart stopped.

It wasn't even because I'd just heard someone had given an execution order that would end with me, Lynx, and Dax dead on a cold, stone floor.

I lost it. "Let us out, you piece of fucking shit! She's not marrying him! Over my dead fucking body."

"Exactly," a guard called back with a laugh.

Of all the times for them to start talking to us…

I blinked, then started up again, Dax and Lynx beside me, both just staring at the door in horror. I smashed my hands against it, kicked, screamed. Blood appeared on my knuckles, welling and dripping down my clenched fists, until Lynx caught me, hauling me back from the door I was destroying myself on.

"Stop it." His voice was deep. Calm and demanding.

For a second, I just wanted to walk him back against the wall, cover his body with mine, and press my lips on his. To kiss him until this entire fucking situation disintegrated and we were somewhere else, somewhere this nightmare didn't exist.

But we were never going to be that again.

All we were, was dead.

I shoved him away, glaring at him. "She can't fucking marry him, Lynx! He'll take the baby, sell her, and we'll never see her again."

The fear rose inside me so thick and swift it was choking. I couldn't breathe. All I could think about was the hundreds of women we'd sold. My father, my uncle, their friends…

Me.

All of us were guilty. It didn’t matter I’d been born into this life. That I’d been groomed and raised to know no different.

I did. I had known all along that what we were doing was wrong, and yet I’d gone along with it because it was normal. Because I’d never had to get my own hands dirty. Because it had been so easy to distance myself from it and pretend none of it was happening when I had others to deal with the women for me.

There had always been that barrier. A go-between. Leech-like men who wanted to be on the good side of the Guerra family name. Men easily convinced with money to do despicable things I would have never had the stomach for. I had no sympathy for the cretins I’d paid to carry out the dirty work.

But all along I’d been paying them money so I could pretend my hands were clean.

They never had been. I deserved every punishment for what I’d done.

But Nyah didn’t. Nyah and that baby had done nothing wrong, and now they were paying for the sins of men like me and her father.

It didn’t matter if I was dead. She would be better off without me. But she wasn’t going to have any sort of life at all if she walked down the aisle with my father.

He’d take what he wanted from her, legitimize the baby she carried, and then toss her away like she didn’t matter.

She did fucking matter.

She mattered so very much.

“Let us out—”

A gunshot silenced me.

I waited for the pain, but it didn’t come. Dax didn’t fall to the floor, gripping his chest. Lynx didn’t have a sickening pool of blood spreading around him.

Three more shots came in quick succession.

I flinched with each one, but this time I was more aware the shots didn’t come from inside our prison.

But from above it.

The screams confirmed it. We hadn’t been able to hear much of all from upstairs the entire time we’d been here, and we were sure nobody could hear us either.

But there was no denying the sounds of fear that erupted through the church above our heads.

No denying the thumping on the stairs or the out-of-breath voice that told the guards, “Carlos is dead! He fucking shot him! Right in the back while he stood at the altar!”

The room spun around me.

Lynx and Dax shouted along with me, them both screaming Nyah’s name, like if they shouted it loud and desperately enough she might hear them.

If she was even still alive.

Four gunshots.

More than enough to kill them both.

My chest grew so fucking tight I could no longer breathe. “Who?” I choked out, standing at the door, closing my eyes and resting my forehead against it.

The only acceptable response would be Nyah had killed my old man.

But my gut said she hadn’t. She might have been a Mafia brat, but she didn’t have cold-blooded murder in her.

No sound came from the other side.

In a voice that was laced with acid and so deep I barely recognized it as my own, I made a demand. “If Carlos Guerra is dead, then I am the next in line. His entire empire falls at my feet. I don’t give a shit who you are, you now work for me. Open the fucking door.”

Lynx and Dax fell silent, both of them staring at me.

The guards on the other side stammered, “We don’t work for—”

I didn’t care if they weren’t my father’s men. I didn’t give the man a chance to finish. “Open the fucking door!”

A lock slid open. And then another. And another.

The handle turned.

The door opened.

Three guards I didn’t recognize stood on the other side, all of them staring at me.

But all I saw was red.

“Smart choice.” I stepped forward, put my hands either side of the closest guard’s head, and snapped his neck.

He crumpled on the floor at my feet, his dead, unseeing eyes staring up at me.

Like I fucking cared.

The other guards whimpered, putting their hands up, like that might save them.

Though maybe it would, because I was all out of time. I shoved past both of them and took the stairs in twos, despite the muscles in my legs protesting the sudden bout of exercise after not moving much for weeks.

I couldn't see Lynx and Dax behind me, but I couldn't stop and turn back.

I just trusted they were there, all three of us with the same purpose.

Get to her.

Save her.

Love her.

The stairs wound their way up to ground level, each step burning through my wasting thigh muscles. The door at the top was open, and we burst through it.

I'd heard the guard say my father was dead.

But nothing could have prepared me for the sight of his lifeless body, his unseeing eyes, the pool of blood surrounding him on the altar steps.

A few people still milled around the church pews, shock written all over their expressions. A priest knelt above my father's body, crossing himself and muttering prayers over his corpse. Tears streamed down his ruddy cheeks.

But all I could think was Nyah's body wasn't lying there beside my father's.

Flowers decorated the church.

The ones in the front rows sprayed with his blood.

And yet I felt nothing for him, other than emotionless and hard. "What happened? Where is she?" I demanded.

The priest looked up and did a double take. "Luca? Your uncle…" He shook his head. "Shot him. Then married her…"

I wanted to shake the older man by his priest collar.

He'd pay for his sins. He'd die at my hands, just like the guards down in the basement. And everyone else who had forced Nyah into this marriage.

"Where!" I demanded.

He pointed to the open doors. "Gone."

I ran for them, trampling flowers, and for the first time in way too long, I burst out into the sunlight.

I blinked furiously, trying to clear the glare from my eyes, Dax and Lynx standing either side of me.

Only for my gaze to slam into Nyah’s right as a car stole her away.

My motherfucking uncle behind the wheel, covered in my father’s blood.

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3

NYAH

Dear Diary,
The Guerra maternity ward… One star. Would not recommend.

"You can stop with the performance now," Enzo snapped as he pulled into the driveway of the Guerra mansion.

I couldn't answer him, my jaw too set in pain until the contraction passed. But when it did, I glared at him from the back seat of his car. "Someone should give me a fucking Oscar if this is a performance. You piece of—oh!"

Another pain, hot on the tail of the last hit me, and I changed my tune entirely. "Enzo, please. I need to go to the hospital. These pains are so close together."

He got out of the car and yanked open my door, not an ounce of sympathy on his hardened face. "Get up."

I managed to shake my head, but there was nothing else I could say or do when I was mid contraction.

Enzo rolled his eyes. "Viktor! Bruno! Get over here."

The two guards rushed over like the obedient little soldiers they were. I felt nothing but disgust for them. Carlos's body wasn't even cold and they

had barely flinched. So much for loyalty. Apparently, it just moved straight from Carlos to whoever was next in line.

Enzo patted my cheek. “You really should work on your poker face, you know. Your disgust is written all over it. Don’t be a judgy bitch. They just know who pays their checks, and it’s not Carlos anymore.” He nodded at them. “Take her to the cages.”

I snapped my head up to stare at him in horror. “The cages…no…no!” I remembered every single thing that had happened to me the last time I had been locked in the Guerras’ basement prison. My scar throbbed at the memory of having their family crest branded into my skin. “Enzo! I need a doctor! I can’t have this baby in the cages!”

“When your time actually comes, I’ll get you a doctor. But until you stop your dramatics, it’s the cages for you.”

Viktor and Bruno took me by the arms, hauling me out of the car and up the marble steps, into the foyer of Carlos’s grand home.

Enzo’s grand home now.

Another pain hit as we crossed the shiny floor, and my knees buckled. I couldn’t keep up with the punishing pace Viktor and Bruno set.

They didn’t seem to care.

They caught me when my body threatened to go down, and it didn’t seem to bother them an iota that I screamed and begged and cried through the agonizing pain intent on tearing me in two. I couldn’t walk, but they had no hesitation in dragging me down the basement stairs, ripping open a cage door, and tossing me inside like I was a mangy dog.

I hit the freezing cement floor with a bone-jarring thud, and my brain flashed back memory after memory of the last time I’d been down here, freezing, naked, hurt.

It had been Luca who’d saved me. Who’d taken my punishment for me, who’d made sure Dax was there to take care of me.

But Luca was dead now. Dax gone.

Nobody was coming to save me this time.

I rolled onto my side, clutching my belly, squeezing my eyes tight and praying when I opened them, I’d be anywhere but here.

Viktor and Bruno left, the door slamming shut behind them.

Leaving me alone in the darkness.

“Hello,” a feminine voice said.

I jumped a mile, but out of the shadows of the cage next to mine, a woman stepped forward. Her dress was torn and tattered. Dirty. As was her skin. Her blond hair matted, and her cheeks sunken.

But something about her was familiar.

Shock punched me in the face. I couldn't remember her name, but I was sure I'd seen her at the party Carlos had thrown here, at his mansion. I remembered because the last time I'd seen her, Carlos had 'gifted' her to Dax and he'd taken her upstairs to fuck. I'd followed them up there, blind with jealousy, only to find he wasn't with her at all.

I knew she hadn't been down here the entire time, but at some point, after I'd been freed from these cages, she'd been imprisoned in them.

Was there no end to the cruelty inside these men?

She bit her lip and squatted so we were closer to eye height. "Oh wow," she murmured, her gaze wandering over the swell of my belly. "You're so pregnant. I heard on the grapevine…"

I nodded and tried to breathe through the pains that just seemed to keep coming and coming.

The woman's eyes widened. "Wait. Are you having the baby right now?"

I nodded frantically; sure my eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

She shook her head. "Noooo, oh no, no, no. Not here." Her gaze lifted to stare at the door Viktor and Bruno had locked when they'd left. "Carlos! Enzo! This woman is about to have a baby!"

I groaned. "Carlos is dead. Enzo doesn't believe me." I stared up at her. "Please help me."

She paused for a second, fear in her eyes, but then gave a quick nod. "Of course. But I don't know anything about babies."

"You and me both."

She grimaced. "I'm Sindy, by the way."

I remembered now I'd been reminded. "I saw you at Carlos's party. He gave you…"

I trailed off because I wasn't sure now if any of that had been consensual. Sindy hadn't seemed like she was under duress when she'd been heading up the stairs with Dax, but had that only been because she was scared of Carlos and Enzo?

I doubted she wanted to be reminded.

Sindy reached through the bars that separated our cages and tried to help me get closer to her. “Gave me to a man? Story of my life, sweetie. Hopefully he was nicer than Carlos’s brother.” She shuddered at the mention of Enzo. “He summoned me over here a few days ago. I haven’t been allowed to leave since.”

Her face and the state of her clothes and body told me there was a lot more to the story than just that, but I didn’t want to push her.

But it was a stark reminder that she and I were no different. I might have been wearing a wedding dress, I might have been Enzo’s wife, but he cared as little for me as he did for her.

I knew what the Guerras did for money. Selling drugs. Weapons.

Women.

Sindy and I were both in the lion’s den, just waiting to be eaten alive.

But my body didn’t seem to care. There was no stopping the contractions that came thick and fast. Without Enzo, Viktor, and Bruno in the room, my body relaxed just a little, but that only seemed to make the contractions worse.

I groaned through each pain, panting, no idea what I was doing, just following the cues of my body. I got onto my hands and knees, rocking from side to side, groaning low and miserably, the pressure between my legs so intense it was hard to think.

Instinctively, I reached around, lifting my dress up around my belly. I dragged my underwear down with one hand, some part of me already knowing what was happening even though I couldn’t see.

I put my hand between my legs and felt something wet and slimy and hard.

I jerked my head up, staring at Sindy. “Oh my God, I think I can feel the baby’s head.”

She bit her lip and clutched the bars so tight her fingers turned white. “Can you get on your back? If you come a bit closer, I can look.”

I didn’t want to move. My entire body revolted at the idea of leaving this exact position, even though it felt like I was being shredded into two.

But I had to. I couldn’t have the baby like this. Not here. Not with no one to catch him.

I forced myself to move, every inch an agony I was sure I wouldn’t survive. But I somehow managed to get down onto my back, in reach of Sindy’s outstretched arms.

Her eyes rounded. “Oh holy shit. You’re right. That’s definitely a head. I think if you just push—”

There was no stopping what my body was doing. I bore down, chin to my chest.

Pain ripped through me, but there was also a strange relief in it too.

Sindy grabbed my leg, helping me position my foot against the bars. “The head is out! Oh my God, the head is out.”

“Is he okay?” I managed to ask around pants, trying to catch my breath.

Sindy shook her head, then nodded. “I’m sorry! I don’t know! He’s face down.”

I’d read enough of the pregnancy books Lynx had given me to know that was a good thing. “Okay. That’s normal. I think. We just—”

I didn’t know what I was going to say or do. But again, my body took over, forcing me to push. I’d never felt anything like it. Like I had no control and yet all the power all at once. I bore down, groaning loudly.

Sindy clapped like a proud parent. “You’re doing it! He’s moving! Holy crap, keep going!”

I panted in between, wanting to cry but knowing that all I could do for this baby now was bring him earthside. I couldn’t magic up a clean, white hospital, or a team of doctors and midwives to help us. I couldn’t take away the evil that lurked just outside the doors.

And I couldn’t bring back his father. The tears that streamed down my cheeks were for Dax. Partially sad, partially angry, all because he should have been here and he wasn’t.

But I was. And I was going to get our son out and into this world safely if it was the last thing I did.

I took a deep breath and held it, pushing down as hard as I could, relishing the last few seconds of my baby being inside my body before he slid out, into Sindy’s waiting hands.

She gave a shout, and I held my breath, praying to hear the miraculous sound of my baby’s first cries.

His little lungs filled the room with a squawk of surprise, like he hadn’t been aware he’d been half hanging out of my body for the last few minutes, just waiting to be born.

I burst into tears, and Sindy held him out to me, panic and wonder and terror all over her face as she stared at the squirming, slimy baby she barely had a grip on. “Quick! Take him before I drop him!”

I reached for him, taking him into my arms, an instant rush of love pouring in over me, along with the wonder of how this tiny human had been inside me just minutes before.

He screamed his lungs out, and I relished every sound, drawing him up onto my chest, cord still attached, both of us trying to catch our breath.

“Hey, little one,” I whispered, my throat clogging with a sob.

Sindy didn’t hold back. She’d only known me for minutes, and yet tears rolled down her dirty cheeks. She clutched her heart and smiled so big it was surprising her jaw didn’t crack. “That was wild.”

That barely covered it, but all the pain and chaos disappeared with the wonder of this tiny human I had on my chest. His face was pure perfection, and with only one glimpse, I knew he looked like his dad. I stared down at a miniature version of Dax, the man I had loved since the moment I laid eyes on him, and felt that same rush for his son.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered to him. “I wish your dad was here to see you.”

I didn’t want to feel anger at that moment. It was there, the blind fury that Dax could just walk away from this, but in that moment, all I wanted to feel was love.

“What’s his name?” Sindy asked through her tears.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

She laughed. “Girl, you had nine months to think about it, and you didn’t come prepared with a name?”

I didn’t tell her that as soon as Dax had walked away, and Luca had died, and Lynx had been locked up, that I’d basically stopped thinking about the future at all.

Sindy must have seen the panic on my face, because she rubbed my leg reassuringly. “He doesn’t need a name right now. You have time.” She frowned at us though. “He’s still attached to you though. Is that bad? Don’t we need to cut the cord?”

I rubbed my baby’s back and he rooted around my chest. Instinctively, I dragged down the bloodied fabric of my dress and let him find my breast. In amazement, I held him carefully, letting him attach and suckle. “We need something to tie off his cord first. Every birthing book I read said that.” I peered through the gloomy light at her. “Do you have shoelaces?”

She shook her head, a frown pinching between her eyebrows. It smoothed out in the next moment though. She took a tie from her hair.

“What about this? I think I can break it so it’s more like a string…” She concentrated on the small circle of elastic for a second. There was a tiny tearing sound, and then she grinned at me, victorious. “Here!”

I inched closer to her, and she reached out, gently tying it around the cord and pulling it tight.

I tugged a tie from my own elaborate up-do and passed it to her. She had to use her teeth to get it to break, but under my instruction, she made a second knot around the cord, clamping it off.

“How do you know this?” she asked breathlessly.

“I don’t. But my best friend watches a lot of *Grey’s Anatomy*, and I’ve watched enough episodes with her that I know this is what they do. Shonda wouldn’t let us down.”

I hoped.

The door slammed open, and Enzo walked in. He did a double take at me and Sindy, and the baby I clutched in my arms, wishing I could blink and magic us out of here, away to somewhere safe.

“Do you believe me now?” I asked him wryly.

Enzo just stared. “Is it a boy?”

I wanted to lie and say it was a girl. Maybe, somehow, that would have saved us, and Enzo would have had to change whatever plans he’d made to take over Carlos’s empire. But he peered over at us, and his grin widened.

“It’s a boy.”

He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked my cage, but his phone rang at the same time. He frowned at the screen, then pressed it to his ear. “What?” He listened intently for a second, then turned around, pacing a few steps away, his back to us.

Sindy’s gaze darted to the open cage, reminding me it was unlocked.

Like I might be able to get up, rush Enzo, free her, and escape, all with a baby in my arms. She’d clearly never given birth. I doubted I could even crawl my way out of this cell right now, let alone jump up and fight off a man twice my size.

Enzo was so intent on his conversation that he didn’t even glance our way. “What the fuck do you mean he’s alive?”

“I thought you said Carlos was dead,” Sindy whispered to me.

I frowned, trying to make sense of Enzo’s words. “He is. There’s no way…”

There was no way Carlos could have lived through that many gunshots. His eyes had been still, unseeing.

Dead.

I shook my head. “He is.”

Sindy squinted at Enzo’s back. “Then who the hell is alive?”

Enzo’s voice rose an octave and he spun around to face us, even though he continued his conversation with whoever was on the phone. “You’re telling me my nephew rose from the dead like he was fucking Jesus? He just walked out of the goddamn church? We had a deal! He was supposed to be burned to a fucking crisp!”

My entire body locked up. Every muscle. Every bone. My baby clutched tight in my embrace. My breath faltering because none of what he was saying made sense.

And then I laughed. A single snort of pure amusement, followed by another until I was belly laughing so hard it hurt.

But fuck, it felt good too. My body came alive, every inch, every cell, relaxing with the knowledge that I’d been right all along.

Luca wasn’t dead.

If Luca was alive, then *he* was the Guerra heir.

And Enzo knew it.

My smile widened while I stared at his panicked face. “Run, Enzo.” I laughed at him. “Run. You know the way Viktor and Bruno and all the others fell in line at your feet when they thought you were sitting on the throne? That’s what they’ll now do for Luca. As soon as they hear he’s alive, they’ll become *his* men. I don’t think he’s going to be too pleased you tried to have him killed.” I grinned. “Hilarious, though, that whoever you paid did you dirty.”

Enzo glared at me with more hate in his eyes than I would have thought possible. It was hard not to shrivel beneath the intensity of it, but I stared back at him, refusing to give him an inch.

Luca was alive.

And if Luca was alive, maybe the mirage I’d seen through broken, watery, pain-filled eyes back at the church was not a hallucination after all.

Hope flooded my body. I suddenly felt lighter and, one by one, everything fit together. “You had them all taken from me, didn’t you? Dax, and then Luca, and Lynx… It was you all along, wasn’t it?”

They had never left me. Not willingly. I was suddenly as sure of it as I was the baby I held against my heart.

Enzo shook his head, staring down at me like I was a cockroach that needed to be stomped on. “You really are fucking stupid, aren’t you?”

Except I knew I wasn’t.

Enzo crouched beside me, so we were eye to eye.

I refused to look away. Refused to back down. “Run,” I whispered. “It’s your only shot. Run before Viktor and Bruno get word that Luca is alive and it’s you who’s kept in a cell.”

To my surprise, the fear in Enzo’s eyes didn’t intensify. It only hardened into something darker.

He took the blade from his pocket so fast I barely had time to react. He lunged for me, and all I could do was flinch as his knife slid through the baby’s umbilical cord, detaching him from my body.

I screamed when he tried to grab for the baby, but a swift punch to my face sent me reeling, my grip on the tiny child loosening enough for Enzo to swoop in and take him from my arms.

My head rang, my vision blurred. Screams echoed in my ears, mine, Sindy’s, the baby’s. I couldn’t make sense of any of it as I teetered on the edge of consciousness, fighting hard against the blackness threatening to take over.

The cell door clanged shut once more, Enzo and my baby on the other side of it. “I’ll run, *princess*,” Enzo spat, using the nickname Luca had given me. “But I’m taking the baby with me. Nothing has changed, just delayed. You can tell Luca I’m still coming for him.” His evil smile widened as my baby screamed in his arms. “And that I’ve got his heir.”

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4

DAX

Dear Diary,
I thought getting her back would be enough. Turns out home still has one person missing.

This had to be what eighty felt like. Stiff joints. Weak legs. Sunlight so blinding you had no choice but to close your eyes against it.

Despite doing what I could to stay fit in the confined space of the room I'd been kept in, every step hurt.

But nothing felt as bad as watching Enzo drive away with Nyah in the back seat, both of them covered in blood.

Luca struggled in the same way I did, both of us down there too long to not feel the effects of it. We'd both lost weight. Fed, but not enough for it to keep starvation at bay. My lips were dry and cracked from dehydration and the cold.

But we stumbled after the car, a cry falling from my lips as the woman I loved, the mother of my child, was stolen away.

I spun, staring at the others. "We have to—"

I didn't even need to say it. I could tell from their expressions they knew it too.

Lynx, in the best shape of the three of us since he'd been the last to be captured, stormed back inside the church. "Your car keys," he shouted at the priest. "Now."

The priest didn't argue. The man was clearly terrified, and he pulled items from hidden pockets in his robes. A phone first. And then a set of keys. With trembling fingers, he tossed them to Lynx who'd already made it halfway back down the aisle to where Carlos's dead body lay.

Luca's gaze drifted to his father, and he looked away.

"Luc," I started, able to call him that now, even though he would probably kill me if I called him that in public. We'd had no one but each other for so long, I probably knew him better than I knew myself.

He held up his hand. "Don't. That's a problem for another day when my psychotic uncle doesn't have our girl."

Once upon a time I would have bristled at anyone calling Nyah theirs.

But on his lips, it didn't bother me at all. It just felt right.

We were a family, the four of us. Being separated had only cemented that fact for me, and I knew my feelings mirrored Luca and Lynx's.

We could only pray Nyah felt the same and could forgive us.

Keys jingled, and Lynx came striding back out into the harsh afternoon sunlight. "Black Jag in the parking lot. Can you two walk or—"

I was sure my expression matched Luca's.

Lynx shrugged. "If you can walk then you can run. Hustle."

Luca winced. He had to be feeling every painful step in the same way I was. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting to Nyah before Enzo could completely disappear with her.

Across the parking lot, the lights on a car blinked, and Lynx threw himself into the driver's seat, Luca and I falling into the back seat after him.

He didn't wait for either of us to put on seat belts. "Where? Your dad's?"

He didn't need to specify which of our fathers he meant.

Luca ran his fingers through his dirty, dark hair. "I guess. I can't imagine he'd be stupid enough to take her there, but maybe if he doesn't realize we've escaped…we're supposed to be dead right now. I don't think he saw us before he drove away."

"Or he doesn't know we were kept alive in the first place…"

Lynx glanced at me in the rearview mirror. We'd had endless conversations on who we thought had taken us. We'd never been able to

work it out for sure. The closest we'd gotten was Lynx feeling like he'd recognized the voice of one of his abductors, but he hadn't been able to say for sure who it was, and the guards on our door had been a rotation, rarely speaking even when delivering food. They all looked the same. Young men, easily swayed by money and power, I was sure. Faceless and nameless in an army whose leader we never saw.

But Luca's gut instinct said it was his father's doing. And the way they'd set us free as soon as they'd realized the head of the Guerra family was dead and Luca was next in line was a telling sign.

But then again, anyone who walked in this world would be scared of the Guerras. Finding out Luca was now the don, definitely could have scared any man into opening the door, no matter who he was hired by.

"It doesn't matter now anyway," I muttered, leaning forward to rest my hands on the backs of the two front seats. "All that matters is her."

Luca grimaced. "All that matters for today, is her. Tomorrow, I'm going to kill every single motherfucker I can get a gun to. They'll all die for what they did to us. And to my father."

I glanced over at him. "You're upset about that?"

He shook his head sharply. "Fuck no. That asshole can rot in Hell 'til the day I have to join him there. But it should have been me who put him to ground. That was my right after everything. That was my kill."

Lynx's gaze flickered to his in the rearview mirror, his frown a concerned one. I couldn't blame him. It was Luca who sounded psychotic when he talked like that, but neither of us said anything.

Luca had a lifetime of scars from his father's hands. If he thought he was owed his death, then that was his call.

My heartbeat thumping in my ears and adrenaline coursing through my veins were the only things I heard for the rest of the drive. The mansions in Providence grew bigger and bigger until we turned onto Luca's street, the Guerra mansion sprawling out in front of us.

We turned into the driveway, armed guards stepping in front of the car. But Luca rolled down his window and glared at them.

The shock on their faces would have been comical if I hadn't been so desperate to get to Nyah.

"Open *my* fucking gates," he commanded.

For the longest of seconds, they didn't move. They stared at him like he was a ghost. One even whispered, "But—"

Luca cut him off, “But I’m dead? Obviously not. If you want to remain breathing, I suggest you let us pass.”

I held my breath, eyeing their guns. We were completely unarmed of anything except the vial of holy water swinging from the rearview.

Unless the guards were secretly vampires, I doubted that was going to help us any.

To my surprise, they nodded obediently and stepped back, fiddling with the controls on the brick pillar. Inch by inch, too slowly for my liking, the gates swung open.

I stared at Luca as Lynx gunned it up the long driveway. “So you’re the Mafia king of the Guerra empire now?”

He gazed out the window and shrugged. “Guess so.”

I had no idea if that was a good thing or not.

But Lynx pulled into the turning circle at the top of the driveway, not bothering to park the car neatly. He left it idling and looked back at the two of us.

Luca swore beneath his breath. “His car isn’t here.”

I slammed the heel of my hand against the seat beside me. “Damnit! Where else would he go?”

Luca breathed hard and shook his head. “I don’t know. He has a house of his own somewhere. Out of state, I think. I’ve never been there.”

All I could think was my mom probably would have known where. That raw wound inside my chest that had opened up when she’d been murdered had never closed. Little pieces of it tore further every time I thought about her, each one an unbearable sadness.

But not one that could help me now. She was gone.

I had to hope like hell that Nyah wasn’t.

“We check the house first,” I declared, taking charge. “Question the staff. They’ll know. The staff always knows everything in a house like this.”

Like he knew I was thinking about my mom, Lynx reached back and squeezed my leg. Something he never would have done before but now felt completely natural.

We piled out of the car, the three of us storming the house.

Luca’s eyes raged with anger. “I hope to fuck this door is locked. I need to kick something.”

Lynx glanced at him. “You’ve barely eaten in fuck knows how long. The only thing that’s going to happen if you try to kick down a door is that

you'll break your leg."

Luca rolled his head on his neck, something audibly cracking in it. "Yeah, well, I need to do something before I lose my fucking mind."

To save Luca an injury, I made sure I got to the door first. The handle gave way beneath my hand, twisting to open. "Well, that was easy," I muttered.

"Too easy," Luca shot back. His hand went to the back of his pants, and he made a face when he remembered he no longer had a gun stashed there. "Fucking hell!"

I cringed at his shout. "Guess we aren't sneaking in then."

Heavy-booted footsteps came from somewhere deep in the house, and I searched for anything that I could use as a weapon. Lynx did the same, picking up a vase from a side table. I grabbed some sort of marble statue of a woman's naked body from beside it.

Luca stood there like he didn't give a flying fuck if his father's men—or I guess now his men—filled him with bullets.

Viktor and Bruno rounded the corner at pace, skidding to a stop in front of us. They took us in, me and Lynx armed with decorations that didn't come close to matching their guns.

But then their gazes landed on Luca.

Viktor blinked, his voice a wobble. "Fuck. It's true then. You're alive."

Luca didn't waste time on pleasantries. He glared at his soldier. "Give me your gun."

Viktor bowed his head and nodded once, laying the gun across Luca's palm without hesitation. "Yes, boss."

Bruno didn't move. Just stared at Luca like he couldn't quite believe it.

Luca had the gun at the man's temple in a second. He sighed, the sound all relief at having a weapon back in his grasp once more. But it only lasted a second before he was making his demands. "Talk. Where's my uncle?"

Bruno needed no convincing. "I don't know. He left."

"How long ago?"

"Minutes."

"Going where?"

"He didn't say."

Luca spun to stare at us. "Let's go."

Lynx dropped the vase on the tiled marble floor. It shattered into a hundred pieces, and he plucked Bruno's weapon from his fingers. "I'll take

that before we do, thank you very much.”

I tossed my statue onto the remains of the vase and followed the other two to the door.

“Boss, wait.” Bruno stepped forward, vase fragments crunching under his boots. He ran to block our exit.

Luca glared at him. “Today is not the fucking day to test my patience, Bruno! Get out of the way!”

Bruno shook his head.

“No?” Luca asked, hard as steel. “Are you seriously saying no to me right now? You do see that I’m the one holding the gun, don’t you?”

Bruno nodded. “Yes, but Enzo—”

“Enzo is getting away with my woman because you won’t fucking move out of my way!”

Bruno sucked in a deep breath and shook his head. “She’s in the cages. Enzo left with—”

I didn’t hear anything else. I ran for the hallway near the gym, knowing that was where the stairs that led to the cages were. I shoved it open and practically fell down them, grasping at the wall to catch myself when my weak legs threatened to give out.

The air smelled wrong.

Metallic.

Sick.

Luca and Lynx stopped at my back, all three of us staring at the horror scene that played out in front of us.

“Call a doctor!” a woman I vaguely recognized shouted from behind the bars of a cage.

Hers was locked.

The one Nyah lay in wasn’t. I stumbled to her side, dropping down on the cold floor, not unlike the one I’d slept on in the church. I barely even felt it beneath my knees. I just gathered her up in my arms and held her, my entire body shaking.

“The baby, Dax. He took the baby.”

Her dark eyes shone with tears that begged me to do something. To fix this.

I didn’t know how. One half of my heart screamed to run out the door and search the streets for our son.

But the other half, the bigger half, was owned by the woman lying here on the floor, needing me, even if her words said otherwise.

Luca stared at Nyah, shock written all over his face, and then sharply spun on his heel. “Viktor! Bruno! You get every man we have, every person who has ever owed us a favor, every cop we have on the books. Fuck, get your damn grandmothers. Someone find my uncle, and bring me back my son.”

Luca’s gaze met mine.

“Thank you,” I mouthed at him.

He nodded.

The four of us knew the truth, but the Guerra army wouldn’t hunt down one of their own for a random baby.

But for Luca’s son?

They’d go to the ends of the earth.

Luca’s gaze slid to Nyah’s. “I’ll find him. No matter what, I’ll find him.”

“You’re alive,” she whispered and then looked at Lynx. “And free.” Then up at me. “And here.”

I stroked her hair back off her face. “None of us would have left if we’d had the choice.”

She closed her eyes, but tears still fell from beneath her lashes. “I didn’t want to believe it. But then you didn’t come back. And everyone else was so sure Luca was dead. And Lynx was the last straw.” She clenched her fingers into my shirt and sobbed. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I should have done more. I should have protected him better…”

Lynx’s expression was so tortured it looked like he was being ripped in half. He stalked across the room and dropped to his knees at her side. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Not a fucking thing.” His fingers clenched around hers.

“But I—”

Luca held himself tightly, his gaze fierce. “We all do what we have to do to survive. You were just doing what you had to. Nobody blames you.”

She stared up at me, her bottom lip trembling. “I only got to hold him for a minute.”

The pain of that separation speared through me, and I held her tighter to my chest, gathering her up in my arms, hugging her fiercely. “We’ll get him back.”

She pushed me away, trying to get to her feet. “I can help. We have to leave now. They haven’t been gone for long.” She managed to get onto her knees and grasped at the bars, trying to pull herself up.

Her legs wobbled when she tried to put weight on them, and she crashed back down, her knees hitting the stone floor hard. She cried out, and I shot Luca a look.

“We need to get her to a hospital.”

“No! No hospitals. I’m going to find my son!”

Luca glared at her. “Stop being stubborn. *I’m* going to find your son. You’re going to go upstairs with Dax and rest. You just had a fucking baby, Nyah. I’ve already got a hundred men out searching for him. Enzo won’t get far. We’ll have that baby back in your arms before morning.”

I looked over at him, scared he was making promises he couldn’t keep.

And yet even if he was, he was saying exactly what Nyah needed to hear. She was in no condition to go driving all over the city, searching all the places Enzo might be hiding. She needed medical attention, food, and sleep.

She stared at him and then eventually nodded. “Please, Luca. Please…”

She didn’t need to say the rest. We all knew the words that hung in the silence.

Please don’t let Enzo hurt him.

They were promises Luca couldn’t make, but he made them anyway. He knelt in front of her and grasped her chin. “I will turn over every inch of this city, of this country, of this entire fucking world until I find him for you, Nyah. I promise, my men will bring him home.”

He leaned through the bars of the cage and kissed her forehead tenderly.

Then he pushed to his feet and turned to Lynx. “I need you.”

Lynx squeezed Nyah’s fingers.

“I need to find my baby. Take me with you,” she whispered to him desperately.

He smiled, his expression tender. “I never got to tell you I love you too, you know?” He laughed a little. “That’s all I could think of, the entire time I was locked up. So I need to say it now, without wasting another second.” He brought his hands to cup her face. “I love you. And loving you means loving your baby. So trust me when I tell you that you don’t need to fight this fight. You aren’t alone anymore. And you’re never going to be alone again. We have this. We’ll find him and bring him home, and then we’re all

going to live happily ever after.” He gazed around the cage-filled basement and sniffed. “Maybe not here in this hellhole, but somewhere. Together.” His gaze connected to mine, and then to Luca’s. “Aren’t we?”

Again, it felt like promises we couldn’t actually make, and yet all three of us did, knowing it was the only way we would be able to keep her here.

Her gaze darted nervously between Luca and Lynx. “You’ll come back,” she whispered. “Promise me.”

They both nodded fiercely, and this time, I knew it was a promise they would keep.

“Always,” Luca swore to her.

Which felt as much like an ‘I love you’ as Lynx’s had been.

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5

NYAH

Dear Diary,
Today I learned a mother's heart can keep beating after it's been stolen.

The doctor fussed over me, and while he was asking me questions, checking the placenta, and inspecting my most intimate parts to see if I needed stitches, I sent Dax to find a way to get Sindy out of her cell.

He came back within moments, holding a pair of bolt cutters.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Couldn't find the keys?"

His gaze strayed immediately back to me. "Didn't want to waste the time. I knew where the tool shed was."

He used the cutters to break open the lock on her cage, and she patted him on the arm appreciatively.

He nodded, his gaze already back on me. "Is she okay?" he asked the doctor.

The doctor confirmed what I already expected. "I need to put in a couple of small stitches, but overall, yes. All her stats are good, and the placenta is whole. She looks to have had a very uncomplicated natural birth." He smiled at me. "Well done."

I didn’t smile back. There was nothing about this birth that felt right or uncomplicated. Accepting his praises didn’t feel good when I’d let a man take my child from me.

My face throbbed from where Enzo had punched me so hard he’d almost knocked me out, but I refused to let the doctor inspect it, or give me anything for the pain.

It paled in comparison to the agony of losing my son.

I didn’t want any relief from that. I needed to feel all of it so I stayed angry.

Rage would be what kept me going until I had him back in my arms.

Sindy moved toward the door, but I caught her hand. “I know you want to get out of here—”

“And run far, far away? Yeah, a little bit.” She smiled at me ruefully.

“Thank you.”

She nodded. “I didn’t do much. Just caught him as he came out. The rest was all you. You were a warrior.”

I didn’t feel like one. I felt like a broken shell of a woman who needed this doctor to stitch up every inch of her body, not just the tears made by birth.

But I doubted anyone could do that. I couldn’t be fixed. There were pieces of my heart missing. Not just the baby, but Luca and Lynx as well, and until I could have all of them here with me, I wasn’t going to be right.

Sindy brushed off the doctor’s requests that she stay and let him check her over once he was done with me. She squeezed my hands, assuring me Luca and his men would find Enzo, and then walked herself out.

Dax moved in to pick me up, but I shook my head. “No. I need to do this myself.”

The doctor frowned at me, but Dax only nodded, instead helping me to my feet so I could stand on my own. My entire body ached like I’d been hit by a truck, and I gasped at the strange feeling of not having my baby inside me anymore.

Tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked them away, because sadness had no place in my heart right now. All that was left was a mixture of anger and love.

We made it to the top of the stairs after a very slow climb, and Dax helped me onto my old bed. I stared at the ceiling, his fingers wrapped

tightly around mine, while the doctor injected me with a localized anesthetic so he could clean and stitch my tears.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time, and then he stood, pulling off his gloves and handing Dax a business card. “If I can’t convince you to go to the hospital, please, at least take this. If she spikes a fever or she’s suddenly in pain, call me immediately. I’ll won’t be far. Day or night, whatever Mrs. Guerra needs.”

I closed my eyes at being called that name. The name that was branded on my chest.

It didn’t matter that I’d said ‘I do’ to Enzo under duress. That I would have never said those words willingly. That it wasn’t legal.

I would forever be Mrs. Guerra in the eyes of these people. The doctor. The soldiers. Carlos’s friends.

Hell, I’d bet that by morning, there’d be a dozen news articles about it, and then the entire world would know me by that name.

My heart squeezed over the fact if I’d been Mrs. Luca Guerra I might not have minded so much.

“I’ll call if we need you,” Dax promised, and the man left.

Finally, the two of us were alone in a house that didn’t belong to either of us. We weren’t in great shape, but together for the first time in much too long.

“I can’t be in this dress,” I whispered to him. “Or this room.” I wanted to add “or this house,” but I was too exhausted to go anywhere else.

“Where do you want to be?”

I swallowed thickly. “Luca’s room.”

He nodded instantly, and I was so incredibly grateful that he understood without explanation or jealousy.

We left the bloodied sheets behind and moved down the hallway. Luca’s scent hit me immediately, even though he hadn’t been in this room for months. It was impossible to ignore, and I breathed in deep lungsful of it, hating Enzo even more for the fact Luca and Lynx were out there now, hunting him, instead of here with me.

I just wanted all the men I loved, both fully grown and brand-new, here where I could love on all of them.

I couldn’t have that.

But I did have the man I’d loved first. And my heart cracked wide open when he led me to Luca’s bathroom and turned on the shower.

He said nothing as the room filled with steam and he peeled off the disgusting, blood-and-dirt-and-who-knew-what-else-covered dress, from my body.

“We need to burn that,” I told him. And not just because I had never wanted to wear it in the first place. If the police raided this house, which I was sure they would eventually, I didn’t want anything tying me to Carlos’s murder.

“We will,” he promised. “But I need to take care of you first.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. You…” I realized, for maybe the first time, he looked rough. His skin was sallow, his eyes and hair dull. I reached up and stroked my fingers over the beard he now had. “I like this.”

He laughed. “It’s kind of mandatory when you’re being held captive. They tend not to give you razors.”

Even though he laughed, I could see the pain behind his eyes.

I realized he was as filthy as I was, and still wearing the clothes he’d been in the day he’d gone missing. I suddenly needed them off him.

All of it needed to be burned. Everything that could remind me of this day or the weeks I’d been alone in the lead-up to it needed to go up in flames.

But the only way to do that was to know exactly what had happened.

When we were both naked, we moved beneath the spray. The water was warm and clean, and even though I’d only had a shower that morning before I’d put on my wedding dress, so many things had happened since then that I was sure no shower had ever felt this good.

Dax hissed with the same sort of pleasure-pain.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He shook his head. Then nodded. “It hurts. My skin and bones and everything inside me feel so damn raw I don’t know how I’m not bleeding. But it feels good too.”

He squirted a big handful of shampoo into his cupped hand, and I expected to run it through his own hair and beard, which desperately needed it.

But instead, he smoothed it onto my hair. He stood behind me, massaging it into my scalp, and then my neck, and then lower, over my back, my breasts, and my still-swollen belly.

He avoided touching me between my legs, leaving me to judge how much that area could take, but every other part he washed away the filth,

leaving my skin fresh and clean.

There was nothing sexual about any of it.

It was just him taking care of me in the way I'd missed so damn much.

"Where were you?" I whispered. "One day you were here with me, and we were planning a life. And then that phone call…"

That phone call where he'd told me he was leaving.

He leaned down and kissed my shoulder. "I never wanted to make that phone call, Nyah. You have to know I would never willingly have said any of that."

I nodded. Because I had known. I'd fought. I'd told everyone it wasn't true. That something had been wrong, and yet I'd let them talk me out of it.

Even though my heart had known better. "Then why?"

His fingers traced up and down my arms, like he was reminding himself over and over again that I was here with him. "I was in the middle of a back piece at the shop, and then men rushed me. They put a bag over my head, and then I'm being shoved downstairs and into a room, phone thrust into my hand and told to tell you I was leaving." He turned us, so the spray hit my back. He was tall enough it missed his face. My body blocked his from most of the water, but if he was cold standing there, wet and naked, he didn't complain.

He stroked his fingers down the side of my face. "They said they'd kill you if I didn't let you go."

I caught his hand, pressing my cheek into it and closing my eyes. "Nobody believed me when I said you wouldn't have left willingly. They all thought it was because of me and Lynx and Luca…" I felt so stupid. "Maybe I believed that a bit too. What we had, just the two of us, was so good." My hand drifted to my belly, and an ache rose inside me over it. "We were so good we made a baby, Dax. But then I walked away."

His golden-eyed gaze bore into mine. "You never walked. You were forced."

It didn't feel like it mattered. "I left, and when I came back, things were different. There was Luca. And Lynx, and all along there was you, a piece of my heart I could never give up. But it was different. Something had changed."

He took my hand and squeezed my fingers. "It had only changed for the better. I might have been jealous at first, sure. But it's really hard to stay jealous when they were only giving you more. Not replacing me. Just

adding to it.” He smiled ruefully. “Plus, Luca and I…I don’t know. Being locked up together for so long changes you. I understand why Reaper and Lynx got so close. When you have no one else, a bond forms.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Are you telling me you and Luca now like each other the way Luca and Lynx like each other? That while I was out here all alone, thinking the three of you had abandoned me, you were actually all just swapping saliva and doing butt stuff?”

Dax snorted and gathered me back up in his arms. “No. But I am glad to see a little spark back in you, so if all it takes is some butt stuff to see that again, I might be inclined to try.”

I laid my head on his wet chest and wrapped my arms around his waist. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Good. Because you’re the only person I want in that way, Nyah. I hope you know that. But Luca and Lynx and me…something has changed. You can’t go through all that and not come out feeling like a brotherhood.”

The sound of that left me feeling warm all over. “I have so many questions. What did you guys even talk about all that time?”

“You,” he said without even thinking about it.

“You were gone for so long I lost count of the days. You had to have talked about more than just me.”

“Your eyes. Your mouth. Your humor. Your hair, your teeth, your ears…”

“You talked about my ears? Seriously? Did Luca make fun of them because they kind of stick out?”

He laughed. “There was mention of hoping the baby got mine instead.”

I scowled playfully at him. “He’s an asshole.”

“He’s an asshole who is so hopelessly in love with you that being apart from you almost destroyed him.”

I stared up at Dax. “He told you that?”

He shook his head. “He didn’t need to. I knew the same pain, and so did Lynx. It almost destroyed all of us.”

I breathed out heavily. “It almost killed me as well.”

He cradled my head, and I held him tighter, not wanting to ever let him go.

Eventually, he turned off the water, and we found towels, patting each other dry with them as best we could. I was bleeding, and Dax found some

overnight pads in my old bathroom.

My heart gave a squeeze, because I knew I hadn't put them there, I'd had no need for them. It had to have been Virginia before she died. Dax's mom had always thought of everything and had taken care of me from the moment I'd moved in.

I didn't tell Dax any of it. It would have been stupid to say it felt like she was watching over us.

But I felt her presence in the moment nonetheless.

Dax had no qualms in kneeling to attach the pad to my underwear and gently drawing them up my legs, fitting it in place. The blood didn't bother him in the least, and he placed a soft kiss to my belly.

It broke my heart, because that kiss should have been placed on the head of our son.

A crushing wave of exhaustion hit me again, and the pain suddenly felt more acute. I blinked sleepily at him. "I think my adrenaline is wearing off."

"Mine too." He lifted the covers on Luca's bed. "Get in. We both need rest."

He held me in his arms, my skin against his. He told me more of the things they'd talked about while they'd been held in that room. Their theory that Carlos was behind all of this. That he'd taken Dax, faked Luca's death, and had used his connections to have Lynx arrested and held on false charges.

"Punishing all of you for standing against him in Scotland," I whispered. "But what was my punishment?"

"Marrying him," Dax suggested. "He couldn't do worse while you were carrying a baby he thought was his grandchild."

I looked up at him through sleepy eyes. "But you think after…"

"I think he would have sold you to the highest bidder and never felt a second of remorse for it."

I shivered, not knowing for sure if he was right. Carlos had seemed different in the end. Kinder. Truly heartbroken over losing Luca.

But it had to have all been lies, because he must have known Luca was still alive. "Why didn't he just kill all of you?"

Dax grimaced. "He was going to. We were supposed to die as soon as your wedding was complete. I think we were only alive until that point in case he needed us as leverage."

“Over who?”

“You, most likely.”

I sighed. “I really thought he had changed, you know? Now I’m realizing I dodged a bullet.”

Except I’d walked right into another. It had just come from Enzo’s gun instead.

My skin crawled at the thought of my tiny baby in the custody of that man. “Do you think he’ll kill him?” I whispered to Dax, voicing my deepest, darkest fear.

But Dax was so quick to answer. “I think he’d be insane to touch a hair on his head. He’s the only bargaining chip Enzo has to walk away from all of this with his life. He isn’t going to give that up.” He kissed my lips softly. “Plus, if our boy is anything like his mother, he’s going to be a warrior. He’s probably giving Enzo hell right now.”

I smiled at that. “I really hope so. I only got to hold him for a second. I don’t know anything about his personality yet.” That set off a new fear inside me. What if I couldn’t remember his face? Or how it felt when he kicked me from inside? What if that was the only time I had with him, and I’d wasted so much of it on things that no longer mattered.

All that mattered was getting him back.

“He doesn’t even have a name,” I whispered.

Dax’s warm breath misted over my lips. “We can fix that. We can pick a name right now if you want to.”

But I shook my head. “I can’t.”

I didn’t have to explain to Dax why. He accepted my heart and my head just couldn’t. Not yet. Not while I was in shock and it was taking every ounce of strength not to fall apart.

“Then we won’t. We’ll wait until he’s back in our arms.”

I just prayed that wasn’t so long he could actually talk and tell us his name himself.

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6

LUCA

Dear Diary,
"I love you" sounds a lot less dramatic when it's followed by "Shut up and fuck me."

I stormed out of the house with the feeling of Nyah's skin still burning my lips. Lynx moved close at my side, exactly where I wanted him, always, even though he smelled like a fucking sewer.

I knew I did too, but Viktor and Bruno didn't mention it, and neither did the doctor who passed us on his way into the house.

I caught his arm. "She's important to me. If she dies, so will you."

He did a double take but nodded quickly. "Yes, sir."

"Thank you," Lynx added, then looked over at me wryly. "Should I start calling you Carlos now, or…"

I scowled at him. "Like you feel any differently about her."

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "Not saying I do, but you're suddenly sounding more Mafia than I've ever heard you."

"Yeah, well, that's what happens when someone takes your son."

He glanced at me, and I knew he heard it.

The truth in the statement.

That Nyah’s baby wasn’t just hers and Dax’s. That I wasn’t just saying it because it meant an army of my father’s soldiers would hunt Enzo down and bring us back what had never been his to take.

That I was saying it because in my heart that baby was mine.

Just like his mother.

Just like Lynx.

Just like freaking Dax, who I’d actually come to care for as more than a friend during the long hours we’d spent locked up together.

Not that I wanted to jump Dax’s bones the way I did with Lynx. It wasn’t necessarily that sort of love I felt for him.

But it was impossible to go through what he and I had and not form an attachment.

Walking away from him felt almost as bad as walking away from Nyah.

Not that I’d tell him that.

But it was just one more reason to find my motherfucking uncle and set every wrong right. Including him killing my father.

The old man should have died at my hands for all the shit he’d put me and Isabella through. But killing his brother would have to do.

Viktor jogged alongside me as I strode toward the nearest car. “We’ve got everyone out there, boss. Except the staff on the gates here, and those who will accompany you—”

“I don’t need a fucking bodyguard. Everyone goes out. Everyone!” I glanced at Lynx. “Can you get the Slayers over here to make sure Dax and Nyah are safe? I don’t want my father’s men anywhere near her. She needs to be around people she trusts.”

He nodded. “If someone gives me a phone.”

Bruno handed him one and then passed me another, along with a set of keys and a thick roll of cash. “Money, transport, and phones. They’re burners from your father’s stash.”

“See Nyah and Dax get one too. I need to be able to talk to them. But as soon as the Slayers get here, you’re all out. Nobody comes back until Enzo is found. Capiche?”

Bruno and Viktor both nodded obediently. “Yes, boss.”

Lynx raised his eyebrows at me as if to say, *See? You’re Mafia Luca now.*

I hadn’t been Mafia Luca in years and I sure as shit didn’t want to go back to being him. All I could think about was the expression on Kara’s

face when I'd walked into her cabin in the Slayers' compound.

I never wanted another woman to look at me like that. Her hate for me hadn't been unwarranted. The fact she and my sister were even still speaking to me said more about their personalities than it did about me. I knew I didn't deserve their forgiveness, but I'd try to earn it every day anyway.

Shit. I needed to call them both. But I knew in my gut, Kara and her men would have kept Isabella safe in my absence, and that right now, all my efforts needed to go into finding her new nephew.

I didn't even know what he looked like.

I hadn't even asked Nyah his name.

I ignored Lynx and hit the unlock button on the keys Bruno had tossed me. The black SUV in front of us lit up, and I was behind the wheel a second later.

Lynx slid into the passenger seat, phone pressed to his ear, one of the Slayers on the other end, presumably. "I'm fine. Yeah, Luca is still here and kicking, he's sitting right next to me. But Nyah and Dax need round-the-clock guards until they're back on their feet. Neither of them is in good shape."

He listened for a second, then nodded. "Thanks, War. I know you need me back before the inter-club meetup next month. We'll be back before then. As soon as we've found Enzo and the baby we're coming home."

Even though Lynx seemed to be making longer-term plans, if I had anything to say about it, we'd be home before the sun rose.

Children shouldn't be separated from their mothers. My mother had been taken from me much too young, and it had fucked me up in more ways than one.

I didn't want that same fate for Nyah's son.

Lynx ended the call. "So what's our plan here?"

"You heard what I promised Nyah. We turn over every inch of the city until we find him."

"So, we're searching for a needle in a haystack?"

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "Enzo has a brand-new baby with him. He's not going to get far without supplies. We'll start there."

And so began one of the longest nights of my life. Driving. Striding into every late-night convenience store and questioning the staff on whether they'd seen Enzo. My phone rang incessantly, with updates from other

crews, all assigned to different areas, different places Enzo might have gone, each one more and more frustrating as they all turned out to be empty leads.

The sun rose, and exhaustion set in hard.

“We need to stop,” Lynx said quietly after yet another failed convenience store questioning. “I can barely see straight.”

“Then take a fucking nap,” I snapped at him.

He stared at me. “So you can fall asleep at the wheel, making your scowl right now the last thing I see before I’m dead? No thanks.”

I knew he was right. Despite all the rage and adrenaline and the promises I’d made to both Nyah and myself that I would bring the baby home in no time, my eyelids were so heavy they felt like lead. I’d already steered us into the gutter once when I’d fallen asleep for half a second and Lynx had jerked the wheel to straighten us and wake me up.

It was dangerous for me to keep going.

And yet I needed to. Because the thought of that baby out there with my sadistic uncle, and Nyah at home counting on me, was more than I could fucking bear.

I stormed into a service station, flashing them a photo of Enzo, but yet again, they shook their head.

Frustration got the better of me. I slammed my hand against the countertop. The clerk flinched, and then with a shake in her voice, politely asked me to leave. I dropped a twenty on the countertop as an apology and stalked back out to the car.

Lynx was already behind the wheel. I stared at him through the window. “Move.”

“No. We’re going home to sleep, and then we’ll get back to it.”

Panic clutched at my chest. “I can’t go back there without the baby. I made her a promise.”

Lynx’s lips pulled into a tight line. “Then we’ll go to a hotel. Either way, we need to sleep. We’re no good to anyone like this. That woman you just scared the life out of is probably calling the cops right now.”

I glanced back over at her through the window. She had a phone to her ear and was peering through the early morning sun at us.

I was pretty sure she was reciting our license plate to whoever was on the other end. “Fucking hell,” I muttered.

Lynx gave me a knowing look. “Ready to get in now?”

I rounded the car and got inside.

Within seconds of him pulling away, my head lolled against the headrest and sleep dragged me under.

I woke what felt like a second later, but the sun was a lot higher than it had been when I'd drifted off, and I blinked, trying to work out where the hell we were.

An ugly orange motel sign came into focus, its chipped paint making the whole place feel old and dingy.

Lynx was asleep in the seat next to me.

I nudged him. "Hey. Why are we asleep in the car when there's perfectly good beds just feet away?"

His eyelashes fluttered. "I couldn't wake you up. Now do me the same courtesy and leave me alone. It's so warm for once."

I knew what he meant. The room where we'd been held at the church had been cold and damp. The interior of the dark SUV had heated up nicely over the last few hours, baking in the morning sun with us inside it.

It did little for the smell though.

I shook him again. "No, come on. We're getting a room. If we stay in here any longer we'll fry or die from the smell. I'm not down with either option."

Lynx grumbled but mustn't have liked those options either because he opened his door and got out. He stretched, his shirt riding up to show off his abs. Interest flickered to life inside me for the first time in weeks.

Even if we hadn't had Dax in that room, inadvertently acting as a giant cockblock, I doubted either of us had even thought about sex in the days and nights we'd been kept down there.

Nothing like wondering if you were going to be executed to kill your libido.

But for the first time in weeks, neither of us were in any imminent danger. And that was enough for my body to remember how much it liked his.

I forced myself to turn away and walk into the motel, knowing he'd follow.

I asked the woman behind the desk for a room.

She glanced up at us. "Two beds or one?"

"One," I said before Lynx could answer.

He winked at her. "He likes to spoon."

She covered her smile by rifling through a drawer full of door keys. “Room twenty-three. Just out the door and to your right.” She grinned at me. “Enjoy the snuggles.”

Lynx laughed, and I rolled my eyes at both of them.

But I envied their laughter. I knew Lynx was hurting no less than I was, but maybe because he hadn’t been down there so long, maybe because he hadn’t had to walk over his father’s dead body, he seemed to be handling all of this better than me.

Maybe it was just because he wasn’t an asshole like I was.

He took the key from my hand and walked ahead, opening up the room. I realized at some point during the night, I’d started limping, though I was only really feeling it now that the adrenaline had worn off.

Lynx squinted around at the peeling, faded wallpaper, and the ugly orange-brown carpet that probably hadn’t been replaced since the eighties. “Well, she’s not pretty but she’s a hell of a lot nicer than where we slept last night.”

I agreed. I leaned against the wall, trying to take some of the weight off my weakened body.

Lynx’s eyebrows furrowed. “You all right?”

“Fine.”

Except I wasn’t. I slumped down on the edge of the bed and dropped my head into my hands. “Fuck.”

Lynx didn’t say anything, but I felt him there, watching me. Then he walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower and, within a few seconds, steam wafted out into the main room.

“You’re going to set off the fire alarms,” I warned him wearily.

“Don’t care. Get in here.”

I didn’t have it in me to verbally spar with him like I normally would have. I was too fucking tired and broken and sore and, right now, someone else telling me what to do felt good. “Okay.”

He blinked, like he hadn’t expected me to agree so easily either, but he moved aside to let me into the bathroom and then closed the door behind us. I just stood there, like my body had forgotten how to get into the tub.

It had been so long since I’d seen one that maybe I had.

Lynx took pity on me and undid the shirt that would probably need to be incinerated it was so dirty. I cursed myself for not getting clean clothes

either at the house or at some point during the night when we'd been in and out of stores.

But all I'd been thinking about was finding the baby and bringing him home.

Lynx undid my pants, and I managed to toe off my shoes so I could take off the rest of my clothes.

Lynx grimaced at me.

I made a face at him. "Not exactly the expression someone wants to see when you're naked. Wow."

But he shook his head at me, his fingers reaching out to trail down my arms gently. "You've lost so much weight."

I dared to inspect my reflection in the mirror over the sink. I couldn't see my whole body but enough of it to know Lynx was right. I'd been fairly lean to begin with, so any weight loss would be dramatic. My face was pale, my collarbones stuck out, and my beard was in desperate need of a trim.

I scraped a hand through my disgusting hair then instantly regretted it. "I look like shit."

Lynx was only marginally better. Bigger than me to begin with and not held captive as long, his body hadn't suffered as much as mine and Dax's had.

He stepped in closer behind me and stared into the mirror over my shoulder. "Nothing time and a couple of burgers won't fix."

I wasn't even hungry. I was pretty sure my stomach had given up on telling me to eat when there had been no food to give it.

Lynx put his hand to the back of my neck and guided me into the tub, the shower running into it. "Come on. Get clean. It'll help."

He went to help me in, and I gave him a glare that could have withered plants, so he stepped back, hands up, and let me get in by myself.

The first splash of clean, warm water on my back felt like heaven. It rolled down my skin, chasing away the dirt and grime and memories of the last few weeks. I squeezed my eyes shut tight and tried to breathe, fighting off the panic of claustrophobia that hadn't been a problem until I'd forgotten what sunlight was.

I was vaguely aware of Lynx moving around the bathroom, and when he got into the shower behind me, I gave in to the gut instinct of leaning back on him and letting him wrap his arms around me.

I shuddered at the touch.

Fuck, it had been a long time. There had been no mental space for this inside that room. I had no idea how much the guards knew about the three of us, about the extent of our relationships, and I'd been scared to give them any more ammunition to hurt us. Every time Lynx had reached for my hand I'd moved away, not because I didn't want his affection, or his touch, but because I was so fucking scared if the guards knew about another way to hurt me, they would.

And at that point, I couldn't lose another thing.

Another person I loved.

"I've fucking missed you," he murmured, running handfuls of the motel's cheap bodywash all over me, and then him. The soap lathered up between our bodies, making our skin slide against each other.

We both brushed our teeth with supplies the front desk had given us when we'd requested them. The water rinsed away the dirt and grime from our mouths and skin, along with any hesitation I'd had about not touching him, not looking at him too long, not talking about anything that might give the guards a reason to hurt him.

I turned in his arms, so we were facing each other. I traced my hands over his biceps and washed them clean, then traveled over his chest and up his neck, the water taking the grime away.

And leaving only him.

"Fucking missed you too," I mumbled.

With my fingertips massaging the base of his neck, and slipping up into his hairline, he groaned at the touch. He circled my other wrist and dragged my hand down his body, over his chest and abs and lower to his cock that was already getting hard.

I gripped him there as he ducked his head the inch it took to make us equal heights, his mouth finding mine.

I'd forgotten what this felt like. Or maybe he and I had never really kissed without the hot, demanding energy of attraction, the danger of getting caught swirling around us making the whole thing that little bit more exciting.

Kissing Lynx now, after everything we'd been through, didn't feel like that.

It felt better.

It felt like coming home.

I leaned into him, not just because of the weakness in my body but because I so desperately needed someone to touch me. “You’re so warm,” I murmured. I dragged his hand down the same way he’d done to me.

I didn’t need to beg him for what I wanted. He knew.

I started up slow, rhythmic strokes on his cock, and he matched it on mine. Our lips found each other’s again and again, our tongues doing what they did naturally, falling back into old rhythms where everything was familiar and wanted.

Everything about him turned me on. From his hair that was now longer than I’d ever seen it, slicked back with water, to his eyes, his gaze constantly scanning my face, my body.

I shook my head. “Stop looking at me like you’re scared I’ll break.”

He breathed out heavily.

And then closed his eyes, pressing his forehead to mine. “I’m still trying to convince myself you’re really here and not dead in the fireball that claimed your car. You didn’t let me touch you the entire time we were in there, so forgive me if I wasn’t one-hundred-percent convinced I didn’t hallucinate the whole thing.”

I breathed in the fresh minty scent of his breath, and the soap, and the water that fell around us. “If I was dead, I couldn’t be stroking your cock right now.”

He gave a little half-smile. “It feels fucking good, so trust me, I’m glad you’re not.” But the smile fell off his face. “Are you okay?”

I groaned. “Are you?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

He nodded, acknowledging we were both probably going to be messed up over all of this for a long time.

But I wanted to be good. I wanted to not flinch at every sound. I wanted to not close my eyes and see my father dead on the floor, or Nyah covered in blood. I wanted the baby safe in my arms so I could put him back in Nyah’s and Dax’s.

It all built up to a pressure inside me that Lynx’s fingers on my body systematically rubbed away with every touch. “Don’t stop,” I whispered to him.

“I won’t,” he murmured, lips trailing off mine and across my neck.

He kissed and sucked and licked me there, my head lolling to one side to give him all the access he wanted. My dick got impossibly hard, and it was only the distraction of getting him off that kept me from coming.

Lynx gripped the hair at the nape of my neck, tilting my head back so he had the perfect angle. “I want your cock in my mouth.”

“Fuck. Yes.”

“You gotta stand on your own.”

I hadn’t even realized how heavily I was leaning on him. I shifted back against the cold, tiled wall, grimacing because it didn’t feel half as good as his solid, warm chest.

But then he was on his knees in front of me, his hot mouth wrapping around my cock, and I forgot all about the tiles.

He wasted no time, his hand coming between my legs to squeeze my balls.

I groaned at the sensation and held on to the back of his head, watching my cock disappear into his mouth, inch by inch. His tongue slid along the sensitive vein on the underside of my dick, and when he pulled back just enough to play with the tip of me, I was sure I was going to come right then.

“Fuck,” I moaned, not giving a shit that these walls were probably paper-thin and the guests on either side could likely hear every word.

I needed this. Needed him.

He took inches of my cock at a time, blowing my mind with every slide of his tongue.

But it was an embarrassingly short number of minutes before my balls ached with the impending release and my entire body became aware I was going to come.

“Lynx,” I warned, voice hoarse.

He just kept going.

I gave up any semblance of control and gripped his head harder, forcing my cock past his lips again, watching him take it deep in his throat, his pleasure at pleasing me written all over his face.

Another squeeze of my balls, and I fisted my fingers in the shower curtain, the plastic film crumpling beneath my fingers. “Fuck, Lynx!”

I came down his throat, and he took every drop, his Adam’s apple working to swallow me down.

I slumped down into the tub with him, aware again that the water still fell around us, and grateful it hadn’t yet turned cold. We sat facing each other for a long time, both of us just breathing in the same air, basking in the feeling of being clean, of being in the sunlight.

Of being together.

I slid forward, hooking my legs over his, one either side of his narrow hips, and closing the gap between us.

He wrapped his arms around me, drawing me even tighter. I’d gone soft after my release, but he was still rock-hard, his junk rubbing up on mine.

He buried his face in my neck and groaned. “You feel so good.” He breathed there for a moment. “I want you, but I know you’re messed up right now…”

I kissed his neck. “Not too fucked up for that.” I rocked against him, feeling how hard he was. “Never too fucked up for that.”

Lynx groaned and dragged me onto his lap. “We have no lube.”

“Don’t need it.” There was enough of his arousal. His dick was already coated in it from being pressed up against me like this.

All I had to do was lift my hips…

He guided the tip of him to my entrance, and I hovered there for a moment while he played with me, nudging my asshole. I tilted his head back, needing his mouth on mine.

He delivered, the kiss between us hot and wet and so fucking needy it was almost embarrassing. I wanted him there so fucking badly. “Fuck me,” I groaned at him. “Need you.”

It was the most vulnerable I’d ever been with a man. I had always had big feelings, hidden behind sharp words and guns and mistrust.

But there was none of that with Lynx. No fucking games. No inevitable rejection. Just him and me, and too much bad shit to want to waste a second where it felt good. I slid down onto his shaft, inch by inch, letting him fill me, needing it all because we both knew we were no longer guaranteed a tomorrow.

He gripped me tighter as he bottomed out and dragged my head down so he could claim my lips. His hips thrust deep from below, and I ground down on him, meeting each movement, my body adjusting to his, and the pleasure welled again. I got hard between us, and the friction of our bodies grinding together was too much for both of us.

“Fuck, Luca,” he groaned in my ear. “I’m in love with you.”

I paused, but he grabbed my hair, holding me tight, not letting me shift away. His thrusts became more insistent, harder, and he said it again. “Don’t give me shit about it. I’m not taking it back. And I don’t expect you to say anything either. But I’ve been waiting weeks to tell you that. For every second that I thought you were dead, I wished I’d told you. So I’m telling you now.”

I pulled back to look at him. “You done?”

He shrugged, then grinned. “If you play with my nipples and keep squirming on my dick like that, I might be.”

“Super fucking romantic, Lynx.”

He cocked his head. “Are you telling me that big, bad, Mafia prince—oh wait, king now—Luca Guerra wants romance?”

“You going to come or what?”

“Now who’s being all romantic?”

“Shut up and fuck me.”

He grinned, thrusting up into me. “Like this?”

I groaned at the feeling of him moving inside me. “Yeah, exactly like that.”

He did it again, and again, both of us forgetting words, and just moving together, finding a rhythm that felt good, and then repeating it until we were both panting and gasping and grappling to get over the line. It was harder for me this time, because I’d already come, but Lynx held out, kissing me, touching me, and when I leaned back, changing the angle and giving him room to jerk my cock at the same time, all of it came together.

Literally.

Him.

Me.

He shuddered and groaned, dick deep in my ass, while my cum spurted from my tip, covering his fist and lower belly. I pulsed and clenched around him, and shouted at every spasm, every tightening of my body that he’d produced.

It took a long time for us to stop, both of us milking each other, drawing it out as long as we could just because being together felt so good. If I was concentrated on him, I didn’t have to think about Nyah and Dax and that by taking a break, Enzo could be getting farther and farther away.

Something deep inside me realized how right Lynx was.

We had come so close to not having this.

I tilted his head back so he was staring up at me. “If I say I love you back, are you going to be a dickhead about it?”

He grinned. “Why would I? I said it to you first.”

I shook my head and pressed my lips to his. “Fine. I love you.”

He snorted. “Your confessions of love need work.”

I scowled at him. “You told me while you were literally pounding my ass. How is that any better?”

“I wasn’t pounding! I was making love!” He snorted.

I rolled my eyes. “Making love, my ass.”

“To your ass,” he corrected.

“I can’t even with you,” I muttered, getting off him and turning on the shower again.

Except when he stood and put his arms around me, kissing my neck again, I knew how lucky I was for us both to be standing there.

And that despite our unromantic verbal sparring, we’d both meant every word.

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7

LYNX

SIX WEEKS LATER…

Dear Diary,
Guilt is a hell of a thing. It eats people alive long before it kills them.

I stared down at my phone, at the text message that had come in an hour before.

I still had no idea how to reply.

NYAH:

Come home. I can't do this anymore. It's killing me. I need to name the baby. Tomorrow at three at the Slayers' clubhouse. Please come. I need you.

Luca had received an identical one on his phone, and he wasn't doing any better than I was. If anything, he was worse. He'd taken one look at it, driven us to the nearest dive bar, and had told the guy serving drinks to just give us the entire bottle of whiskey.

So far, Luca had drunk at least three quarters of it by himself. Ice sloshed against his glass, amber liquid barely given the chance to get cold before he knocked it back.

I nursed mine. "We should leave tonight if we're going to make it back to Saint View in time."

Luca hung his head. His hair was so long it fell around his face, creating him a shield so he didn't have to face me. "I'm not going."

I frowned. "What? Of course you are. You read her message. She needs us."

He turned to glare at me. "She doesn't need me, Lynx! How the fuck could she? I promised I'd bring her baby back six fucking weeks ago. And nothing! I've had every man I have out searching for Enzo, and he's disappeared like a ghost in the night, the baby with him." He shook his head miserably. "I can't go back there until I have her son in my arms. I won't."

I sighed, staring at the red neon bull's-eye, lit up on the wall behind the bar. "None of this is your fault."

He laughed bitterly and swallowed down another mouthful of his drink before he answered. "Isn't it? Sure as fuck feels like it is."

We hadn't stopped from the moment we'd walked out those church doors six weeks ago. Thanksgiving had come and gone without any sort of celebration. We'd eaten turkey sandwiches at a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in a town whose name I couldn't even remember. Christmas had been spent somewhere in Vegas, after a tip-off that Enzo had been seen in the area, but it had led to nothing. Instead of watching the ball drop on New Year's Eve, we'd been in an abandoned warehouse torturing one of Enzo's acquaintances until he was so close to death we'd had to admit he obviously knew nothing.

Luca had ended the man's life anyway, without so much as a blink of remorse.

There was no doubt in my mind he'd stepped into Carlos's shoes.

Not because he wanted to.

But because finding Nyah's baby had become his single-minded focus and nothing existed outside it.

I refilled his glass. "Drink."

I didn't need to tell him twice. He was so mentally destroyed over losing Nyah's son, and his father's death, and the role he'd now found himself in as Carlos's heir that drinking had become his new favorite pastime.

I couldn't even blame him. It was a hell of an empire to inherit. He'd fallen apart the day he'd realized a shipment of women had arrived, ready to be sold. Viktor had brought him the news, making a vital error in

thinking that Luca was just like his father and would want to continue in that trade.

I'd never seen Luca lose his shit to that degree. I'd had to put my arm around his neck and choke him until he'd passed out to get him to stop. Viktor had been lucky he'd walked away with nothing more than a black eye and a bruised rib.

He hadn't needed me to confirm Luca no longer wanted the Guerra empire to have anything to do with human trafficking. I'd told him to report back when all the women had been returned to their families.

He'd called within twenty-four hours to say it was done.

It hadn't absolved Luca of his guilt, and I'd watched it eat away at him until he'd picked up a phone and called his lawyer to have him arrange payments to be made to each of the women who'd been saved.

Even then, we'd both known it hadn't been enough.

Maybe it never would be.

But because I loved him, I hoped for it. Because otherwise, he was on a very dangerous path to self-destruction. I'd watched it, him endlessly hunting down leads by day, drinking and smoking himself into an early grave by night. He didn't sleep much, just obsessively scrolled the internet, searching for any mention of Enzo. We fucked when he could get out of his head long enough, but as time passed and we were no closer to finding his uncle and the baby, the times I could distract him into feeling something other than pain grew further and further apart.

I didn't want to go home to Nyah empty-handed either. The thought left me cold inside, imagining seeing her face again and having to tell her we'd failed.

But Luca needed more than I could give him.

He and I alone had never worked.

We needed her too.

And so, I got Luca so drunk he didn't even notice when I put him in the passenger seat of his SUV and drove us back to Saint View.

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8

NYAH

Dear Diary,
"I'll always wait for you" might be the truest thing I've ever said.

I'd avoided the Slayers' clubhouse like the plague. It should have been the place I ran back to for safety, but one thing had stopped me.

All the baby items Bliss and Violet and the other women had gifted me before I'd left. They still sat piled up in the corner of the room I'd slept in.

Violet had come to the Guerra mansion almost every day since everything had happened, apart from the few days she'd been in the hospital over Christmas to have her own baby.

A baby nobody had taken from her and who was still safe in her arms.

I could have asked her at any time to put the clothes and baby blankets and the crib away.

And yet, I hadn't. Because asking her to do that felt a lot like me giving up on ever bringing my baby home.

And that just wasn't an option.

Ever.

But every day Luca and Lynx didn't return with my son, my heart ached. For every day he didn't have a name, it felt like my memory of him

grew weaker.

I needed to be able to call him by his name when I talked about him. I needed everyone here, all our family and friends to say it with me.

Dax found me holding a knitted blue-and-cream blanket, and he touched it gently. “So soft.”

I nodded. I hadn’t forgotten for a second he’d lost his child too. For the past six weeks, we’d leaned on each other, drawn strength and comfort in someone else feeling the same way.

I was sure it was the only way we’d survived.

That and knowing that Luca and Lynx hadn’t given up. We’d called the police chief daily, but as weeks rolled by with no progress, it became clear to me a Mafia baby snatch while I was married to the kidnapper wasn’t something they were willing to touch. I found it interesting that they knew I was married to Enzo without me giving that information. To me, it proved what I already suspected.

That Enzo had the police in his pocket and without something else forcing them to search for my child, they weren’t going to. They’d given us all the pitying looks while they shuffled papers, but nothing more.

My parents had untactfully brought up that maybe we should try to move on.

Meanwhile, Luca and Lynx hadn’t even come home for clean clothes.

Not until today.

Lynx had messaged to say they’d be here, and I knew Lynx didn’t make promises he wouldn’t keep. Nerves over seeing them both again after so long apart fluttered around my belly until I felt like vomiting.

A knock came from the hallway, and Violet stuck her head into the room. “Lynx and Luca are up at the gates. I asked Levi to let me know before he let them in, just in case you wanted to see them first. In private. There’s a lot of people here for this, but you can have a few minutes alone if you go up there. It’s been so long since you’ve seen them, I just thought…”

Violet proved over and over again that she was the best sort of friend. Thinking about what I would want or need even when I hadn’t considered it myself.

I glanced over at Dax. “I think I do want that. Will you come with me?”

I already knew he’d say yes.

Violet spoke into the phone and told Levi we were coming. Dax and I slipped out of the clubhouse via the back door, so we didn’t have to walk

through the crowd of people all waiting to celebrate our baby with us.

He deserved that. Even if he wasn't here. He was ours and he was too important to just be called baby all the time.

Violet walked with us, and at the top of the gravel drive, Reaper stood with their new baby in his arms.

Luca and Lynx stood at his side, staring down at the newest addition.

My heart squeezed.

Because it should have been Lynx and Luca staring down at my baby. I loved Violet's son TK. He was beautiful, and I hadn't had to force myself to go see her in the hospital and to hold the little boy who was just weeks younger than mine.

I had loved him just as instantly as I'd loved the baby I'd birthed.

So I knew how much it hurt Violet to not be able to do the same for me.

Violet took TK from Levi's arms, and they quietly moved out of the way, giving us the privacy she'd promised.

I couldn't say anything. They both looked different, and yet beneath the longer hair, the beards, the clothes I didn't recognize, were the two men I loved.

Lynx took a step forward. "Nyah."

I broke. A sob I'd been holding in burst free, and I rushed to Lynx, throwing myself at him.

There was a safety here, between the three of them that I didn't feel anywhere else. A wholeness that couldn't be broken even while I was missing the part of my heart that belonged to my son.

Lynx smelled the same. I inhaled, feeling my nervous system slowly shut down, one neuron at a time, until I could breathe again.

He stroked my hair and whispered he was here now and he wasn't leaving again. Not without me. He promised it until my sobs subsided, and I wiped my eyes, remembering all the times this man had been my rock.

Today was no different.

"I really want to kiss you," he said quietly. "But I don't know if you want that from me anymore."

I didn't even have to think. I just cupped the sides of his face and drew his lips down to meet mine. "I love you," I whispered in between slow, sweet kisses. "I'll always want that."

He breathed a sigh of relief and lifted me off the ground, kissing me properly.

Then he quickly pulled away, his expression full of horror. “Fuck, did I hurt you? Are you okay?”

I nodded quickly, assuring him I was fine. “I’m good. Physically anyway. Clean bill of health at my appointment during the week.”

He stroked his thumb over my lips. “That’s real good, baby. So good.”

He glanced over at Luca, and I did the same.

Lynx bit his lip but didn’t say anything.

I didn’t either. I didn’t know how.

Luca took two steps forward to stand in front of me, his expression stony.

Until it broke, and he dropped down to his knees. “Nyah,” he croaked out.

That one word, my name, sounded so tortured I couldn’t stand it.

I dropped down onto the gravel with him, not caring that it sent pain through my knees.

He tugged me into his arms and buried his face in my neck, trembling as he held me. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

He muttered it in my ear again, his tears wet against my cheek, and no shame in them. He didn’t try to hide them or brush them away.

For maybe the first time ever, Luca Guerra, cold-hearted Mafia prince, let someone see him cry.

“It’s not your fault,” I whispered.

His eyes were red-rimmed when he shook his head. “Don’t let me off the hook. I don’t deserve that.”

I squinted at him, trying to understand why he was so hell-bent on blaming himself. “None of this was you. You didn’t kill your father, or force me to marry you, or take my baby. You aren’t your uncle.”

His breaths were ragged. “No, but I don’t deserve your forgiveness either. I know what it feels like now to have someone taken from you. I know the agony of not knowing is something you can’t forget, no matter what you do or don’t do. It’s always there, just lurking. Even if you think you forgot for a moment, the physical ache in your chest soon reminds you. How many mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters did I do this to when we sold their daughters or sisters? How many lives did we ruin trying to chase down money and power?”

I opened my mouth to remind him he’d been brought up in this world. He hadn’t chosen it. And maybe he had gotten himself out of it too late for

the world to forgive him.

But I could. I had. I knew what he'd done, and I loved him anyway. There was no choice in that. My heart wanted him, no matter what he'd done.

But the one thing my heart didn't need was his guilt or his apologies.

"How long are you going to punish yourself?" I asked him. "Because there is nothing I need to forgive."

"I couldn't find him."

"I know. But neither could I or anyone else."

Luca's gaze burned into mine. "I'm not giving up."

I kissed his mouth softly. "I know. But you need to stop and rest. Let someone else take the lead for a minute." I took in every inch of his haggard face. "You look like shit and you smell like a brewery. Jesus, Luca, did you bathe in alcohol before you got here?"

Lynx grimaced at that. "The only way I could get him here at all was to get him so drunk he didn't realize where we were going. There was no time for a shower."

My heart squeezed. "You didn't want to come back?"

His grip on my wrists tightened. "I just didn't want to come back without him. I promised you…" He shook his head fiercely, then winced, pressing his fingers to his temples. "I'm too old for hangovers of this magnitude."

There was no point worrying about promises that had been made that Luca could never have been sure he could keep. At least with him here and Lynx here, I had two parts of my heart back. "Come down to the clubhouse and have a shower. You still have clothes here. You'll feel better."

He shook his head. "We're already late. I'll just stand at the back."

I stared at him. "Is that what you really want? Me and Dax to stand up there in front of everyone without you?"

He didn't even hesitate. "No." He threaded his fingers through mine. "I want to stand there with you."

Lynx breathed out what sounded like a sigh of relief.

Mine joined his. "Then go and have a shower. We'll wait." I kissed him again. "I'll always wait for you. No matter how long we're apart, I'll always wait."

I looked up at Dax and then at Lynx. "For all of you."

Dax’s eyes shone with the kind of understanding that only came from being so connected to someone it felt soul deep. There was no doubt in my mind he was my soul mate. That we understood each other on a level that went beyond what could be reasonably explained.

Because of that, he understood how I felt about Luca and Lynx. And how I could love Dax with all of my heart but still need Lynx and Luca in the same way.

Love didn’t have a limit. Mine was big enough for all three of them. If I’d learned anything from losing all of them, it was the love I had for them was strong enough to last me the rest of my life.

I wasn’t giving any of them up.

And none of them were asking me to.

Lynx and Luca showered in the clubhouse and put on fresh clothes from the stashes they’d left behind. Lynx came out of his room smelling of the cheap soap he liked, his slightly too-long hair tucked behind his ears and curling at the ends. My heart thumped at the sight of him in his club jacket, like it almost couldn’t believe that after so long he was actually home.

His fingers brushed mine on his way to Luca’s room, and I wanted to grab his hand and never let him go.

He knocked on Luca’s door, and he emerged a second later. Suit pants. Collared shirt rolled to his elbows. His dark hair slicked back into a low ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Stupidly attractive.

I could tell he had an effect on Lynx too. It didn’t even matter that Luca’s eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed. He was unfairly gorgeous.

Even Dax rolled his eyes. “Trust you to be held captive, then be on the road for six weeks, and still walk out like a *GQ* model.”

Luca snorted. “You saying you wanna fuck me too?” He grinned at me and Lynx. “’Cause I already know you two do. Stop ogling me.”

I rolled my eyes. “So all it took was a shower for the real Luca Guerra to return?”

He put his arm around me and kissed the top of my head. “No. This version is a little more broken. But happy to be home.”

“Is home the Slayers’ compound now? Or Saint View?”

He shook his head. “Home is you.”

If swooning was a thing, I was pretty sure I was doing it.

Violet stuck her head in the door and gave me a smile. “How are you four doing? Hayden wants to know if you’re nearly ready or if he should bring out more food to give you all a bit more time? Nobody wants to rush you, so if you aren’t ready…”

Except I was. Dax and I’d had each other to hold during the nights while I cried and fell apart or raged at the world. Every day had felt like a battle, with him there to soothe me, but it had never quite been enough to settle the agony inside.

Today felt different. Today didn’t feel like anger or sorrow or despair.

Today felt like a celebration because the three men I loved were home, and our baby existed in this world, even if he wasn’t in our arms.

“We’re ready,” I told Violet.

She smiled at me in the way a proud mom might and then nodded. “I’ll let them know. Come out when you’re ready.”

Dax took my hand, threading his fingers through mine. “Are you sure about his name?”

I turned around and stared up at him. “So sure. Might have taken us a few weeks to get it perfect, but I’m sure this one is.”

He kissed the top of my head sweetly. “Then let’s go tell everyone and celebrate him.”

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9

ENZO GUERRA

"Would you shut that kid up?"

The woman glared at me from across the room, full of attitude. "How am I supposed to do that? I'm not its mother."

I closed the space between us, wrapped my fingers around her stupid throat, and pushed her against the wall. "Then why the fuck am I paying you to be here?"

To her credit, she didn't back down. Her eyes flashed with anger. "To suck your dick. I'm not a nanny."

I ground my teeth and considered snapping her neck. Or squeezing her throat just a tiny bit tighter, until fear replaced the anger and she learned her place.

But then if I killed her, either intentionally or accidentally, I'd be stuck with the brat again.

And that was a fate worse than listening to Priscilla's sharp tongue.

I let her go and pushed her down on her knees. "Do that job right at least then or get the fuck out."

I dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the floor at my feet as encouragement, and she scowled at me.

"Twenty? That's it?"

I undid the zipper on my pants. "Take it or leave it. We both know you won't make more if you leave. We're in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere."

We glared at each other, and she eventually picked up the twenty, shoving it between her tits. She finally shut up and put her mouth on my dick, and I closed my eyes, one hand leaning against the wall behind her back for support.

Priscilla was at least good at this part of her job. Her mouth was hot and wet, and she could deep throat without gagging, not that I would have given a shit if she had. But I liked sinking almost the entire length of my cock into her mouth, feeling her tongue swirl around me.

I got harder with every slide and pull of her lips, until I was fucking her face hard and fast and she was making little noises every time I hit the back of her throat.

"Yes," I groaned, digging my fingers into her hair. "Take it, you slut."

My balls drew up, pleasure coiling deep inside me. I needed to fucking come.

The baby spat out his pacifier and started screaming the room down again.

Instantly, my dick went soft.

I tried ignoring the brat's wailing, but it was like nails down a chalkboard, ear-piercing and cutting straight through me.

I slammed my fist against the wall, putting a hole straight through the plaster. "Fuck!"

Priscilla rocked back onto her knees and looked up at me. "Just ignore him."

"How?" I glared at her. "How the hell can I ignore something that makes that much noise?"

She sighed and got up off her knees. "I'm not giving the twenty back. Not my fault you didn't come."

Even though I was running low on the money I'd pulled out of my account the first night I'd stolen away into the darkness with the baby, I shook my head. "Just shut him up."

She rolled her eyes, went into the bathroom to wash her hands, and when she returned, she scooped up the baby. "So, what's wrong with you this time? Food or diaper change?"

I didn't care. I stormed out of the room, letting the door slam closed behind me.

In the cheap motel parking lot, I stalked between cars, making my way toward the office. It was unattended at this time of night, but there was an

ancient vending machine that was mostly empty, save for a few probably stale bags of chips and a can of cola. That would probably be my dinner later, but I needed to make a phone call first.

Not the first one I'd made since we'd landed here.

I picked up the grimy black phone and tried not to think about what I was getting all over my hands. Pissed off, I jabbed fingers into the buttons, dialing a number I'd memorized, since I'd called it so many fucking times.

"Hello?"

Despite how out of control I felt on the inside, I forced my voice to sound cool and calm when I identified myself. I was Enzo fucking Guerra. I wasn't going to sound all stressed and squeaky, like I couldn't handle the situation I'd gotten myself into. That baby's constant squawking and demands for attention had done a number on my nerves.

"Fucking hell, Enzo. I was sleeping."

Nice for some. I hadn't slept properly ever since I'd fled Saint View with a baby who never shut up. My irritation only increased. "Sleeping, huh? Sleeping when you should be out hunting down my nephew? You remember him, don't you? Around six feet. Dark hair. The heir to my brother's throne because you didn't do your fucking job in the first place and kill him when you said you were going to? This is what happens when you lie. When you let us think you had a job handled, but really you just faked the whole fucking thing."

He blew out a long breath. "I had my reasons. But I said I would kill Luca Guerra and I will. You don't need to worry about it. Once he's dead, you can come back. How's the baby? Still alive?"

"For now."

He laughed liked we were friends, which we definitely were not. "I think we both know that baby is just fine. You have no choice but to keep him that way. He's the only bargaining chip you have left, Enzo."

Rage bubbled up inside me at the hide of this man. "Watch the way you speak to me."

"Or what? You'll send your men after me? You don't have any. With Luca alive, all of your brother's men fall in line behind him. We both know you're nothing unless Luca is dead."

"So fucking kill him! Kill him so this baby is the Guerra heir!"

The man sounded bored. "And so you, as his stepfather, can control it all until he's eighteen?"

I breathed heavily, trying to fight the rage inside me. “Are you a man of your word or not? You owe me my nephew’s head.”

“Relax. I just had word from my men that he was seen back in Saint View. And if that’s the case, it’s only a matter of time before he finds his way back to Nyah. And that means…”

“You know where to find him.”

“Exactly. He’ll be dead by the end of the week.”

I twisted my head toward my motel room. The baby was crying again, loud enough I could hear it across the parking lot. I was going to lose my ever-loving mind if this didn’t get handled soon. “He better be. Because I don’t know how long I can keep this kid alive if he’s not.”

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10

NYAH

Dear Diary,
Today we finally gave our little boy the one thing nobody could ever take from him.

All eyes turned to the four of us as we stepped outside the clubhouse doors. A crisp breeze blew across my skin, but Saint View never really got that cold, even in the thick of winter, and my jacket kept me warm enough.

But even though I was the perfect body temperature, I froze. I'd just been so confident, with the three of them backing me up, but one step out into the real world and it had disappeared.

All the Slayers and their families had come, along with Dax's brothers and their dad, Stewart. Everyone had drinks in their hands, and there was food on every surface. Kids ran around, oblivious to the sudden tension I felt at having all these people stare at me with sympathy in their eyes.

Dax stepped forward, shielding me, so I had a second to compose myself.

He never let go of my hand though. If anything, he held it even tighter, and Lynx and Luca moved in so close behind me that the heat of their bodies permeated my jacket, warming my back. I hadn't planned how this

would go. We had no official celebrant. I'd figured we'd just get up and tell everyone the baby's name, and that would be that. But now, that didn't feel like enough.

Clearly, Dax felt the same way. "This is going to be out of left field, but just bear with me. Most of you know my mother died recently."

That woke me up. It reminded me Dax had actually lost more than I had in the past six months. I wanted to show him as much support as he'd shown for me. I stepped out from behind him, taking my spot at his side, holding his hand so fiercely tight it probably hurt, but he didn't complain.

His gaze stayed on our friends and family. "We only had a small funeral for her. Just me, my dad, and my brothers."

Stewart dropped his gaze to the ground, and I wished I knew him well enough to go over and hug him. He seemed like he needed it. But I didn't, and so I hugged the man I did know like the back of my hand, knowing he was hurting just as much, even if he was standing up here right now, making speeches.

"Her name was Virginia. And she was absolutely the best mom in the world. She was the sort of mom who came to every soccer game I had when I was five and shouted well-intentioned instructions at me, even though she didn't understand the rules."

King chuckled. "She did that to me too."

I couldn't help but smile at the thought, and then be sad all over again at the realization she was never going to get to see her grandson do that.

Dax continued, "She was the sort of mom who worked long hours but never brought home any of it. I barely knew what she did until not that long ago, because all I remember of my childhood was her whole focus being on me and my brothers. When she was with us, we always had her full attention. We didn't go on too many vacations, but sometimes our sports took us out of town. I had a tournament in Virginia once, and she spent the entire time we were there telling us how they'd named the place after her."

Everyone chuckled.

Dax smiled ruefully. "Thing is, I loved her so much it didn't even cross my mind that it might not be true."

His voice cracked, and I couldn't blame him. I'd had no idea about any of this, but a tear rolled down my cheek at his memories of her, and I wasn't the only one. Several of the women around me had tears in their eyes too.

Isabella openly cried, reminding me that Virginia had been a mother figure to her and Luca too, after working in their home their whole lives.

Dax stared up at the cloudy, wintery sky and blinked a few times, trying to get himself under control.

Everyone gave him grace, murmuring words of encouragement.

He sucked in a deep breath and gazed over at them again. “My mother did deserve to have a state named after her. But she also deserves to have her only grandchild named in honor as well.”

Stewart’s head snapped up, his eyes wide with surprise. “Dax…I know your mother would be honored but…”

Roarke cut in with a grin. “Please don’t name my nephew Virginia.”

Everyone laughed, me and Dax and Lynx and Luca included. I nodded at Roarke thankfully because I suddenly felt like I could talk.

“His name is James Blue. James from the James River, and Blue from the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

Dax put his arm around me and gave his brother a look. “They’re in Virginia, if you didn’t get the connection.”

Everyone laughed again, and Roarke grinned biggest of all.

“I got it, I got it. I remember that trip. We saw the river and the mountains. She loved them.” He raised his beer at his brother. “To James Blue, wherever you are. We hope you come back real soon, little buddy. Because we’re all waiting to meet you.”

Dax’s dad stared into his son’s eyes with watery ones of his own and nodded. “She’s watching over him, you know. Wherever he is, she’s there, keeping him safe. I firmly believe that.”

I couldn’t help myself. I crossed the yard, and Stewart stood. Without any hesitation, he folded me into his embrace, and I hugged him back, crying on his shirt for how much I missed his wife. For how cruel it was that Virginia and Stewart were the sort of parents I so wished I had, and that she’d been taken from us much too soon.

“My boy needs you,” Stewart whispered in my ear, releasing me.

And I needed him too. I went back to Dax’s side, and he enclosed me in his arms once more. Lynx raised the beer someone had given him, and everyone around us joined him.

“To James Blue,” we all said in unison.

And then I added, “And to Virginia.”

Everyone repeated her name, and I realized how wrong I'd been in not doing this before now. It felt good to say their names out loud. To talk about them both with love and hope, instead of fear and sadness.

Dax waved one hand in the air, motioning he still had something he wanted to say. "There's one more thing I wanted to do today. And I'm springing this on Levi. Sorry, bud, I probably should have asked you about this before."

Reaper rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "Am I getting fired? Because if I am, this is a really awkward way to do it."

Everyone laughed, and Dax shook his head.

"The exact opposite, actually. I'm hoping you'll give me some new ink."

Reaper raised his eyebrow. "You want me to tattoo you? Me, the apprentice…you want me to tattoo my boss?"

Dax sniggered. "Is that really so surprising? You don't think you're good enough?"

Reaper seemed doubtful.

Dax's mouth dropped open in mock outrage. "I trained you!"

King and Roarke both looked insulted.

King squinted at his older brother. "Bro, I don't know if you noticed, but you've been gone for at least half of Levi's training."

Dax chuckled and nodded. "Fine. My brothers have trained you." He paused, waiting for Roarke and King to accept his acknowledgement, and then continued. "Point is, you're good, Levi. And I want you to tattoo my son's name on me."

A lump rose in my throat, and Dax pulled his shirt off. There wasn't much in the way of blank skin left on his heavily tattooed, fighter's body, but he turned around and indicated to the space across his upper shoulders. "I didn't know I'd been saving this spot for something special, but this is why."

Levi stood and nodded. "Let me go get my kit."

"I want one too," I said without even thinking about it.

Dax didn't argue with me. I only had one other tattoo, the one he'd given me in such an intimate place that almost no one knew it was there. But this one would be for everyone to see.

"Where do you want it?" he asked.

“On the inside of my arm,” I said without thinking about it too much. “So I can see it every day.”

King beckoned to me. “I’ll do it. My kit is in my car.”

Dax glared at him like he might murder him. “Not a fucking chance you’re putting your ink on my woman.” Then he grinned. “But go get your kit for me because I am.”

I patted King on the shoulder as he got up. “Thanks for offering though.”

He stole a quick kiss, one that was very firmly planted on my cheek, and then winked at his brother and Lynx and Luca, who all looked like they might chop his lips off if he tried that again.

The party kicked off with music, and Hayden served up more amazing food, while Reaper sat with a pencil and a piece of paper and started sketching out a design for Dax’s tattoo.

Mine was much simpler, so Dax and I sat at a picnic table, and he drew our son’s name straight onto my skin in marker.

I marveled at how beautifully he could write letters without any thought, and when he finished, leaning back so I could inspect his work, it was so perfect I almost cried. I wanted his name, Luca’s, and Lynx’s at some point too, but my son had to be first.

While Dax gave Reaper input on the design that would go on his back, he shaved my arm, cleaned it off, and then put his needle into my skin. A tiny mark at first to remind me what it felt like. And then when I nodded, he kissed my lips and permanently marked our son’s name into my flesh.

It didn’t hurt. I’d felt much worse pain, and having this permanent representation of the baby I would give my life for felt good. The buzz of the tattoo gun was soothing, its soft drone blending in with the background chatter of our happy friends, their children, and the men I loved all in one place.

One day I would bring my son back here. I could feel Virginia’s presence in the air, and it felt happy and peaceful. It only cemented in my heart that my child was still alive and well.

We just had to find him.

Dax wiped the excess ink off my arm, and we both stared down at it. Careful not to touch any of the areas he’d just marked, he brought my wrist to his lips and laid a kiss there.

“We’re going to get him back.”

I smiled at him, feeling truly happy for the first time in so long. “I know.”

And I meant it. Every word.

I didn’t know how I knew, but I did.

Dax wrapped some clear film over my tattoo, but before he could put his equipment away, Lynx stepped forward. “Me next.”

Dax looked up at him. “Sure. What do you want? You got ideas or you want to brainstorm something?”

Lynx shook his head. “I want his name on me too.”

Dax and I both froze.

Luca sat at the picnic bench beside Lynx. “I do too.”

Dax choked on his words. “You want the baby’s name?”

They both nodded, and then Lynx added, “If it’s okay with the two of you.” His cheeks blushed pink, and he suddenly went awkward. “It’s just…”

Luca had less trouble articulating his words. “He feels like our baby too.”

My heart had already taken a beating today, and I wasn’t sure it could take another word like that. I leaned across the table, kissing Lynx, and then Luca, loving them both with everything I had.

Dax blinked back tears and then nodded. “This means a lot.”

“To us too,” Luca said quietly.

I couldn’t even speak as Lynx pulled off his shirt and had Dax tattoo James’s name on his biceps. When it was Luca’s turn, he did the same, but had Dax tattoo on his chest, right above the faded Guerra family crest his father and uncle had burned into him so long ago.

In two ways now, scar and tattoo, Luca and I matched.

He sat through his tattoo without complaint, and when he was done, Reaper eventually got his chance to work on Dax’s tattoo.

By the time we said goodbye to the last of our guests and went back to the Guerra mansion, we all had my baby’s name inked into our skin.

Except he was no longer just my baby.

He was all of ours.

He’d made us a family. And even when he wasn’t here, he’d always be at the heart of it.

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11

LUCA

Dear Diary,
She warned me I might get squirted in the eye. I accepted the risk.

My childhood home towered over our heads. It was familiar, the same brick pillars and circular driveway and neatly tended gardens I'd seen every day for decades. And yet none of us made a move to walk inside the doors.

I may as well have been wearing concrete boots. "We should have stayed at the clubhouse."

Nyah threaded her fingers between mine and squeezed reassuringly. "It's not as bad as you think it is. Everyone is gone. All your father's men… your men…are looking for James. It's just us."

Except it wasn't. There were ghosts inside that house, memories I didn't want to stir up. Cages. Nyah's blood. The ache of a missing baby I'd never even met but was so attached to I'd tattooed his name on my skin.

I wanted to be like my sister, who had firmly told me she wasn't ever coming back to live with me if where I lived was in the Guerra mansion. She had her own nightmares attached to this house. She'd clung to Jax, like she was scared I might force her back here. But I was in no position to

make demands on her. I'd be back on the road again in days and couldn't take her with me.

So I'd left her once again in Kara's and Chaos's capable hands, glad she had the family she'd always deserved. Parents who clearly loved her, if the way Kara had hugged Isabella was anything to go by. Little sisters in Jax, Hayley Jade, and Wren. Extended family in all of the Slayers and their partners and kids.

She was happy and settled, while I was anything but.

And again, I thought we should have just stayed at the clubhouse.

I wanted to burn this property to the motherfucking ground.

But Nyah tugged me toward the door. "It's late. There's nowhere else to go tonight. It's here or we try sleeping in the car…"

Lynx groaned. "Please God, no. I've slept in the car way too many times in the last six weeks."

Nyah frowned at him. "You have?"

I shrugged. "We go where the leads are. There's not always a room available."

She bit her lip. "I don't like that."

"I don't like that I made you a promise I haven't kept."

She didn't try to convince me again that it wasn't my fault, and I was grateful for it. Because I would never believe that anyway, so she would have been wasting her breath.

She opened the front door, and we all followed her inside.

She glanced over at me sheepishly. "Dax and I have been sleeping in your room."

Warmth settled over me at the thought of the two of them entwined around each other in my black silk sheets. I didn't know why I liked that so much, but I did. "Good."

Dax rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I can sleep in a spare room tonight so you can have your bed back."

Prior to being locked up with this man, I probably would have readily agreed to that. And yet I'd missed him almost as much as I'd missed Nyah. I'd never talked to anyone for hours and hours on end the way Dax and I had before Lynx had joined us. You couldn't go through something like that and not develop a brotherhood. I found myself shaking my head. "No. Stay." I coughed uncomfortably, not wanting to admit to the tattoo artist that

he’d become important to me. “We’ll pull another bed in there. So there’s room for all of us. So Nyah doesn’t have to choose who she sleeps with.”

“Nyah doesn’t want to sleep yet,” she said quietly. “This is the first night I’ve felt almost right since you all left. I’m scared I won’t feel the same in the morning.”

It was a valid fear. The cold, hard light of day would remind us all that nothing had really changed.

“What do you want to do tonight then, princess?” I asked her, falling back into the nickname I’d given her so long ago.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

It had been way too long since I’d had my hands on her body. Being this close to her, smelling the scent of her shampoo and moisturizer, hearing her voice…all of it only reminded me how much I missed her. How much I’d craved her touch when all I could hear was her crying on the phone.

She gave me a sly grin. “I was thinking that maybe we could fire up the hot tub?”

Lynx raised an eyebrow at her. “The one outside? It’s not exactly warm out there.”

“Well, we don’t have any other. And it’ll be warm in the water.”

Lynx shrugged. “Pre-warning, I also do not have a swimsuit here.”

Nyah shrugged. “I don’t think you’ll need one.”

Dax, ever the responsible one, touched her arm. “I know you feel good tonight, but are you ready for that? You only just got the all clear from the doctor.”

She kissed his mouth. “You’ll go slow.”

He wrapped his arms around her and devoured her mouth like he’d been waiting just as long as we had. “I can do that. But if at any time—”

I rolled my eyes at him. “For God’s sake, Dax. Stop being so boring. She’s trying to tell you she’s horny. She knows that all she has to do is say stop and we will. Quit interrogating her.”

He flipped me the middle finger without even looking in my direction.

I chuckled and kicked my shoes off, leaving them in the middle of the grand foyer. “I’m really hoping there’s something worth drinking in this kitchen.”

“And eating,” Lynx added, following me toward the pantry.

“I’m going to go turn the tub on.” Dax hoisted Nyah into his arms. “You’re coming with me, since you’re so horny and all.” His voice was dry,

and the barb aimed at me.

I winked at her over his shoulder, and she blew me and Lynx a kiss. “There’s wine in the fridge. Food too. Hayden’s kept the place well stocked. I think his love language might be feeding people.”

Sounded about right. Chaos had always loved to cook. It was why I’d left Sinners to him when Isabella and I had left. I was grateful now I had, and that he’d used it to keep the two women I cared about most well fed while I was gone.

I grabbed two bottles of wine from the fridge, and Lynx piled his arms up with food that was easily eatable while sitting in a hot tub. Strawberries. Grapes. Chocolate and nuts.

I took a couple of glasses and an ice bucket, and between us, we somehow managed to get all of it out to the hot tub in one trip.

Dax already had the thing bubbling away, and Nyah was delighted the water was already starting to warm.

I set down our food and drink stash on a little bit of decking that surrounded the tub. “It runs on gas, so it heats up really quickly. You’ll be boiling within twenty minutes.”

She splashed water at me. “Can’t wait.”

Lynx perched on the edge of the tub and uncorked the wine bottle. He watched her trailing her fingers through the water as he took a swig.

He passed it to me, and I probably should have poured it into a glass, but I was so busy watching her, I couldn’t even remember where I’d put them.

I was vaguely aware all three of us couldn’t take our eyes off her and she wasn’t even aware of it. Her long, dark hair fell down her back in gentle curls she must of hot curled in that morning because I knew her hair was naturally straight. Her dark eyes were downcast, watching the water, long, black lashes fanning out over her cheeks. Her pink lips curved up just a little into a soft smile that did things to my insides.

Things I’d only gotten to dream about for the last few months.

Fuck, it had been so long.

“Nyah,” I murmured.

She lifted her head. “Mmm?”

“Take your clothes off.”

She paused for a second, eyeing me, and then Lynx. “My body…it’s not the same as it was.”

I put the bottle of wine down and closed the gap between us. I circled my finger around the hollowed-out space at the base of her throat, one of the few places she actually had skin exposed to the cool night air. “Your body is perfect however it is. It always has been, always will be, no matter how it looks.”

Dax and Lynx sat behind us without saying a word, letting me have the moment with her. I leaned in and kissed the spot I’d been playing with.

Her head tipped back, allowing me access, and I licked her skin, tasting her for the first time in so long.

I closed my eyes, savoring her scent, reminding myself what she smelled and felt like in my arms.

I peeled off the fuzzy sweater that had been keeping her skin warm. She only had a camisole top beneath it, and she shivered as the cool night air hit her skin. “It’s cold,” she whispered.

I kissed a path across her chest and the swell of her tits. “You’ll be warm once you’re in the water.”

She caught my face with her hands, brushed her lips over mine, and said, “Then get me naked so I can get in it.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I liked this version of her, one who took charge and told me what she wanted. I’d expected her to be completely broken, and yet there was a strength inside her, one that had lit up when she’d stood in front of her friends and said her baby’s name out loud.

I undid the button on her jeans and dragged them down her legs. She was already barefoot, her shoes discarded somewhere back in the house along with mine. Her panties weren’t anything special, just plain cotton, but everything looked good on her in my opinion. I ran my finger along the edge of the elastic encasing her leg. “I’ve missed seeing you in nothing but panties.”

She glanced around the backyard, but I already knew how private it was. We had neighbors with houses as big as mine, but we also had trees that were a hundred years old, planted back when this area was first established with old money. They provided a private space, which my father had filled with people and parties. Any excuse to strengthen his network and show off how wealthy he was.

But the only party I wanted to have was with the three people here.

Nyah’s gaze settled back on me. “Then you should see me in nothing but panties.”

Before I could, she took off her camisole top and dropped it at her feet.

I couldn't stop myself from getting my hands on her tits. They had always been a perfect handful, but now they overspilled my hands. I squeezed her nipples between my thumb and forefinger.

She pulled away quickly, and I instantly realized why. My fingertips were wet. "You still have milk."

She nodded. "I know it's stupid. I've been pumping. He'll probably not even want to feed from me when he comes home, but just in case, I wanted to be ready." She shrugged. "But you play with them at your own risk. I can't guarantee you won't get squirted in the eye."

If it had been any other woman, this conversation probably would have been the biggest turn-off.

And yet because it was her, it wasn't. There was nothing about her body I didn't like. I lowered my head to suck one breast.

I'd had worse things in my mouth than nipples that tasted faintly of breastmilk.

She ran her fingers through my hair, holding me there, letting me lick and suck and play with her tits until she was squeezing her thighs together, her breaths so quick they were practically pants. "Luca…"

I knew what she needed. I slid my hand down her belly. It was softer than I'd ever felt it, the skin puckered in places where stretchmarks had changed her. "I like this," I whispered to her, between kisses to her tits.

She bit her lip. "I don't think I'll ever have abs again."

"Maybe not, but you'll have a reminder that our son grew inside you at one point in his life." I dropped to my knees and pressed a kiss to her stomach. "So like I said. I like this."

"You being nice to me is weird," she whispered back.

I gazed up at her. "I'll go back to being mean tomorrow. I just need tonight so you know that even when we're verbally sparring and telling each other to go to hell, this is how I truly feel, beneath it all."

She captured both sides of my face and tilted it up, leaning down so she could kiss me. Her tongue slid into my mouth, and she moaned against my lips. Her breasts dangled in front of me, and I cupped them again, never getting enough of how it felt to touch her.

But the kisses and touching made every inch of me hard, and I was well aware goosebumps prickled her skin. I tugged her panties off, leaving her bare-ass naked.

“Fuck,” Lynx said from behind us.

I’d almost completely forgotten he and Dax were there.

But as Nyah slid into the hot tub, Lynx was the first one to get in with her.

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12

LYNX

Dear Diary,
She still kisses me like I'm the only man in the world.

The warm water bubbled around me, but it did little to cover the erection I'd gotten while watching Luca get Nyah naked. I walked to her, sinking down onto a seat, and instantly putting her on my lap.

She straddled my legs, my dick between us in the water.

I so desperately wanted to be inside her, but I needed to kiss her more.

She sank into me, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me back. We kissed like that for so long that Dax and Luca had time to take their clothes off and get in the tub with us.

But while I was aware of them, sharing the wine between them, their voices a low murmur above the whir and bubble of the hot tub, Nyah never even glanced at them. She had an uncanny way of making me feel like I was the only man in the world, even when there were two others right here, even when I'd just watched Luca suck and play with her tits in front of me.

It didn't matter, because no matter how many men were in her world, she was the only woman in ours.

Kissing turned into grinding, her pussy sliding up and down the length of my shaft, not inside her, just rubbing up against me. She found the

friction she liked, my hands falling to her hips to help her along, so she wasn't doing all the work.

Fuck, she felt good. Her hips had a soft cushioning that was perfect for holding on to, and I took handfuls of her ass, squeezing her cheeks, guiding her up and down my length, even though neither of us made any attempt at penetration.

A bead of sweat rolled down my temple, and she brushed it away. Her skin was pink from the heat too. "Luca wasn't wrong about us boiling within twenty minutes. I'm so hot."

She didn't need to tell me twice. I dug my fingers into the fleshy parts of her hips and lifted her back up onto the edge of the tub. She squealed at the cold night air hitting her wet skin, but I pushed her legs apart and put my hot tongue between her thighs.

She instantly leaned back on her hands, nipples pointed at the stars over our heads, while I fucked her with my tongue.

It only took a second to lick away the water and get to the arousal seeping from inside her. I found her clit and rubbed slow circles on it, working her up, thrusting my tongue in and out of her opening in an agonizingly slow tempo to start, that only increased as we got going.

She brought her feet up to rest on my shoulders, her hips rising to meet each thrust of my tongue. As much as I wanted to close my eyes and savor the taste of her, I couldn't stop watching her either. The way her legs trembled. The way her tits moved with the rest of her body. The pleasure on her face, the surprise that she could be cold but not feel it because of the heat I was creating inside her.

"Oh God, I need to come."

Her pussy needed more than my tongue. I licked my fingers and slid two inside her. She was warm and wet and stretched easily to take me.

"Lynx," she moaned. "Let me suck you."

"Fuck," I managed to get out while she untangled herself from the position I had her in and slid back into the water.

I stood, wincing at the cold air hitting my skin, but it was instantly forgotten when she wrapped her hand around my base and took me into her mouth. She sucked my cock, working me with one hand, her lips busy sliding up and down my length. She tongued the underside, the thick, sensitive vein that led down to my balls, and when she gripped them with her hand, I saw stars.

I moved back abruptly, not wanting to come.

Dax was there to take my place. She blew him while I recovered, and then Luca, and then it was a line of the three of us, towering over her as she slid between all three, kissing, and licking and sucking our cocks, taking each one expertly, and like she'd been waiting to do this for as long as we had.

It was me who broke first. Me who couldn't take another second of her teasing. I pulled out of her mouth, breathing hard, but not willing to move to the side so Luca or Dax could have a turn.

Instead, I put my hands beneath her arms and lifted her out of the water, twisting her around and bending her over the edge of the tub.

She gasped, maybe at the cold air hitting her skin again after she'd been warmed up by the water.

Maybe at the position I put her in, ass out, legs spread, my cock at the entrance of her pussy.

"Say yes, Nyah." I needed to know she wanted this as much as I did.

"Yes," she moaned, pushing her ass back so her pussy took the tip of my cock.

"Have you…" I whispered to her. "Since the baby, I mean?"

She shook her head. "No, but if you don't fuck me right now, Lynx, I swear, I'm going to take that wine bottle and use it in ways it wasn't intended to be used."

Dax and Luca both chuckled behind me, and I was pretty sure I heard Luca say that would be hot.

Her shooting him a dirty look confirmed that.

But I drew her attention back by giving her exactly what she wanted.

No wine bottle required.

She took me easily, already so wet and needy from the foreplay. I leaned over her, wrapping my arm around her from behind, playing with her tits while I fucked her doggy style.

Her back arched, and her fingers gripped the edge of the deck. I stopped going so easy, and the slow fucking became hard and fast, me fighting to hold on when she met every thrust with backward pressure of her own, encouraging me to fill her deep and make her come.

We might not have been able to see the neighboring houses around us, thanks to the darkness and the trees that bordered so many of the yards in this neighborhood.

But I was sure they heard Nyah come. She shouted out her release, and mine followed instantly, both of us coming together, her pussy fluttering and pulsing all over my cock, making it impossible to hold on another second. My balls emptied into her, and I just kept going, both of us riding out the wave until neither of us could stand it another second.

She lay face down onto the deck, and I pulled out, watching my cum drip down her pussy.

It was caveman of me, but I couldn't help but run the tip of my flagging cock between her pussy lips and over her clit, marking her with cum, making sure she was coated in it.

She shivered at every touch of my cock, and eventually, we both sank down into the water.

"How do you feel?" Dax asked quietly.

She lay back against the seat and smiled with her eyes still closed. "So good." But then she opened her eyes. "I'll feel better when you're inside me though."

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13

DAX

Dear Diary,
Hope feels a lot like four heartbeats finding the same rhythm again.

Nyah floated across the water to me. I kissed her mouth, but she straddled me and reached between us, lining my hard cock up with the opening Lynx had just been inside.

Not one part of me was jealous over it.

How could I be, when the look on her face had been nothing but pure pleasure? Despite being together every day for weeks, we hadn't been intimate.

We'd both been waiting for this.

For them to come home.

And now they were here, there was nothing left to stop us.

She sank down on my cock, taking it into her pussy until I was completely buried in her. I didn't ask her if she was sure she could go again, even though it had been months since she'd had sex. It was clear to me she knew what she wanted and she was done waiting for it.

Done not living while she waited for her heart to be whole again.

There was relief in the way I pushed into her. Relief that she still had this in her. Not because I'd missed being inside her, though I had. I would

have never had sex again if she had said she didn’t want to. As long as I could still be with her.

But I was relieved she wasn’t letting the loss of our son stop her from living.

Some days, the grief was so thick I couldn’t see a way out of it, for either of us.

And then some days, like today, like this moment, I remembered there was still so much to live for. That he would come home. And that when he did, we’d be here, waiting for him with open arms, ready to pick up where we’d left off.

I just wanted to meet my son.

But I didn’t want to lose his mother in the process.

Her riding my cock in a hot tub with Lynx and Luca’s steadying presences right here with us reminded me I hadn’t.

That she was okay. She wasn’t broken, and neither was I.

She moaned, sliding up and down my dick, Lynx’s cum deep inside her helping to keep her lubed up.

Luca moved in behind her, one hand coming to squeeze her breast, the other mysteriously kept behind her.

But then I felt the added pressure, her pussy suddenly tighter on my cock, and I knew he had two fingers in her ass, working them into her while she moaned and reached back for him, keeping him right there where she wanted him.

“Need to fuck you, princess,” he whispered. “Fuck, you’re taking my fingers so well. Want you on my cock.”

I drew her in tighter, so she was lying on my chest, but I slid down a bit, angling us so Luca had better access to her ass.

She nodded in between short breaths, alternating between kissing me and twisting back to do the same with him. “God,” she moaned out hoarsely. “I need to come again.”

I took over keeping the rhythm, holding her still, sliding in and out of her pussy.

Luca’s gaze met mine over her shoulder, and something silently passed between us.

We’d thought we were going to die beneath that church. We’d been so sure we would never get this with her again that we’d spoken about it at

length. Driven ourselves mad trying to remember what every inch of her body felt like, while mourning that we were never going to have it again.

His look asked one question.

Are you okay?

I knew Luca could be an asshole. Knew he'd done some shitty fucking things in his past.

And yet it was suddenly him who'd become the best friend I'd ever had.

I doubted he would ever show the world this side of him. The side that cared about another man he didn't want to fuck. The side that could be gentle.

He'd tattooed our son's name on his skin today…

Fuck.

The tattoos.

Hopefully the water-resistant coverings we'd put on them would hold.

Because I sure as hell couldn't stop now.

Luca joined me, both of us pressing inside Nyah's body in unison.

She muffled a cry into my neck, and we both froze.

"Nyah?" Luca asked, his voice sounding tortured. "Is it too much?"

She shook her head so fast and lifted her face. "No. It's so good."

Relief filled me, and I moved beneath her again, rocking my body into hers, Luca matching me stroke for stroke. We built her up, me playing with her nipples, Luca reaching around her hip and finding her clit between us, making sure there was constant, sweet pressure on it.

I could feel Luca through the thin walls between her pussy and ass, her body so tight, so full of both of us that we all got to the edge together.

"I can't come again," she moaned.

"You don't have a choice in that," I whispered to her. "Fuck, baby." I pushed into her again and again. "You're so close, I can feel it."

She knew it too. Her body had been made for the both of us, for all three of us. Lynx leaned in and kissed her, tonguing away any of her doubt, and the only noises she made when all three of us came were sounds of pleasure so intense I knew I'd be hearing them in my dreams.

My orgasm hit me hard, my cock pulsing, and I could feel Luca go off inside her too. His guttural groans matched mine. There was no muffling the cries she let out, her body shaking between us in violent trembles of pleasure. Her nipples were tight and beaded, tiny droplets of milk glistening at the tips that I licked off.

None of us could move. She lay on my chest, Luca on top of us both, my cock still deep inside her, held in place by the fullness Luca provided.

Eventually, Luca kissed the top of her spine. “Good girl.”

She shivered, but her voice choked up. “Please don’t go again. I need you here.”

Luca’s chest rose as he took in a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. “Baby, I can’t.”

She twisted to look at him. “You can. You can stay. Both of you. All of you. I’ve lost too much; I can’t keep losing you as well.”

I put my arms around her and made a promise on behalf of all of us. “None of us are going anywhere.”

Luca had an entire army searching for our son.

Our job now was to take care of his mother.

Luca and Lynx both claimed her lips, kissing her one after the other, promising her when she woke up in the morning, they’d still be here.

I could only pray they were telling the truth.

Because Nyah couldn’t handle another broken heart.

And honestly, neither could I.

I needed this family as much as she did.

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14

LUCA

Dear Diary,
I came back from the dead. The welcoming committee was surprisingly hostile.

I stopped the car in front of the ice rink and peered through the windshield. “What the hell is going on in there?”

Lynx’s confusion was as evident as mine was. “There are people everywhere. Is there a game on today or something?”

I shrugged. “I have absolutely no idea.”

Guilt settled on Lynx’s face. “Me neither.”

I sat back in my seat, the leather creaking beneath me, and I sighed heavily. “We’re really great at running this team, aren’t we?”

Lynx grimaced and pulled his Saint View Vipers baseball cap down on his head. “In our defense, there wasn’t much we could do while your old man had us locked up in a church basement.”

“And the six weeks since? Where we just left Saint View to search for James?”

Lynx shrugged one shoulder. “This team was the last thing on my mind.”

Mine too. It all seemed stupid and superficial when there was a tiny baby who needed us a lot more than a team full of pretty average hockey players who really would have been better suited to beer league than trying to make it into the pros.

I pulled the handle on my door. “Come on. Let’s go face the music and see what’s left of our team.”

Lynx followed suit, and we both slammed our doors behind us. We crossed the parking lot and slipped inside the doors to the rink.

It was like going from the silence of a church to the middle of a packed arena full of screaming fans. The wall of noise was instant, all of it directed at the rink staff who stood in front of the reception area, shouting that nobody was getting in and everyone needed to leave.

“The Vipers’ performance has gone downhill lately.”

“Don’t the players want to address their rivalry with Providence and the drama during the last game?”

“The longer they don’t talk about it, the more fans want to know what’s going on.”

“Fucking reporters,” I muttered, recognizing the mob for what it was and wishing I’d worn one of the baseball caps Lynx was hiding beneath. But they really weren’t my style.

So when attention turned our way, I was left completely unprotected.

The man closest to me did a double take and then shouted, “Holy shit! Luca Guerra?”

Suddenly, every set of eyes in the room was on me, and the wall of noise that had originally all been questions about the team, now became questions about me.

Ones I sure as hell didn’t have any interest in answering. A reporter shoved a microphone in my face, and I pushed him away roughly, trying to get through the crowd to the doors that separated the reception area and kept in the chilly air the rink needed to stay frozen.

Lynx moved to my side, shoving people out of the way like he was my bodyguard.

It probably would have made me laugh at any other time, but I was wholly unprepared for people asking how I wasn’t dead, where I’d been, and what the hell was going on.

I’d had none of this out on the road with Lynx, and I hadn’t even considered this could happen once I returned.

The staff recognized us, and though they looked just as surprised as the reporters, they moved in to help, ushering us past the doors, closing and locking them behind us.

I stood on the other side of the glass, which did little to hold back the noise of the crowd, all of them shouting questions they had no business asking.

I wasn't telling the world shit. They didn't need to know someone had held me, Dax, and Lynx captive, or that they'd been too spineless to show their face the entire time we'd been held down there. Lynx and I were supposed to be dead right now, and my father had told the world I was.

I still didn't know who the dead body they'd found in my car was. Probably some chump off the streets who'd paid to drive my car after they'd put a bag over my head and forced me into a van.

Poor fucker. Probably thought he was having the time of his life, driving around my sports car, only for it to explode into a gigantic ball of flame.

I was still convinced it had all been my father's doing, but there were holes in the theory. Like why he hadn't just killed us. Enzo clearly still didn't know we were alive, at least not until that day when he'd killed my father. But I couldn't work out my father's motivation.

Maybe he just hadn't been able to pull the trigger on his only son.

Though that didn't explain why Lynx and Dax were still alive. He would have had no trouble ending their lives.

Something about the whole thing just didn't add up, but even with six weeks of thinking about it, I hadn't been able to come up with an explanation that fit.

I shook off all those thoughts as the cold air and the smell of stale sweat hit my face. I wrinkled my nose. It didn't matter how many times I came in here, it would always smell vaguely of feet to me.

I still couldn't really understand the appeal of the game. But Lynx's face lit up, like he was a school kid reunited with his friends after the summer break. He let out an ear-piercing whistle, and all the skaters on the ice skidded to a stop to look over at us.

Nobody said a word. Nobody moved.

Everyone just stared at us.

I cleared my throat and mumbled to Lynx, "Well, this is awkward."

Lynx was clearly feeling it too, but tried to shake it off by clapping his big hands together. "How's everyone doing?"

The silence was deafening.

French eventually skated slowly to the front of the group, facing off with us. He pulled his helmet off and stared at me like I was a ghost.

“We held a fucking memorial skate for you!”

I blinked at the pure anger in his tone. I’d never heard him talk to anyone like that. He was normally the most levelheaded guy on the team, a workhorse who did exactly as he was told and never complained.

But French was complaining now. “Are you seriously walking back into this rink after being gone for months with no word? How the fuck are you even alive? We all saw the news that reported your death.”

“The news was wrong,” I said dryly. “Obviously.” I glanced over at X, who was skating in stumbling little circles and definitely not paying attention. “You didn’t tell them?”

He had the decency to blush pink. “Hey! My girl had a baby, and I’ve got two kids, and a minivan, and I drew Levi in the family Secret Santa so I had to find a gift for that. Do you know how hard it was to find that Live, Laugh, Parole throw cushion? And most importantly, I was trying to grow my eyebrows back after a very terrible fire bubble accident. Can you not respect my privacy at this very difficult time?” He ran his fingers over his eyebrows that, to his credit, were kind of patchy.

We all just stared at him.

He shrugged. “All that to say, I might not have been around much.”

“No one has been.” French glared at us over that, rather than his teammates. “We had to forfeit two games because we didn’t have enough players. Jones quit. Strathmores paused their sponsorship. All things you’d know if you’d bothered to be around at all.”

“French requested a trade too,” X piped up, then gave a triumphant grin, seeming to entirely miss the hostile frost in the air that had nothing to do with the ice. “See? I know stuff!”

Lynx groaned. “Seriously, French? You’re the best player we have.”

“Insulting,” X huffed.

I looked over at him. “You aren’t even a player. You’re the mascot.”

“Then at least tell me I’m the best mascot.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, ’cause we all knew he was probably the worst mascot in the history of hockey games. “You can’t even skate, X.”

He slid forward on his skates, stumbling over a chunk of ice which really only proved my point. But he leaned over the rail to stab a finger into

my chest anyway. “That is the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me, Luca Guerra. I’m not sending you a Christmas card now.”

“It’s February.”

“It’ll be December in ten months though! And then you’ll be sorry!”

I watched him skate away and shook my head, because any conversation with X was always baffling. Though I had no doubt he’d be back on the ice within ten minutes, practicing staying upright with that giant viper head that looked more dildo than serpent.

If we could trade anyone, it would be X, but I could admit the spectators did seem to love him.

Who we couldn’t afford to trade was French. We might not have been in the pros and playing for the Stanley Cup, but that didn’t mean we were playing at the recreational level either. If we wanted this team to actually be good enough to make money someday, then we needed guys like French to stick around so the wins piled up and the sponsors came knocking.

I sighed heavily, focusing on the man who seemed like he wanted to do a whole lot more than just poke me in the chest. “How much is it going to take to get you to stay?”

His mouth dropped open. “Is that how you fix all your problems? By throwing your check book at them?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, mostly.”

Not all though. Because if I could have brought James home with money, I would have happily gone bankrupt to do it. My chest ached just thinking about him.

French shook his head. “You’re unbelievable. I don’t want to play for this shitty team, Guerra! This shitty team that has no leadership, no prospects, no fucking hope of making it big.”

There was a muttering of complaints from his teammates, and to French’s credit, he did cringe over his shoulder at them. “I’m sorry, guys. I like you all. I really fucking do, and none of this is your fault. Just like it’s not mine.” He glared at me and Lynx again. “Place all the blame squarely on their shoulders, where it belongs.”

I threw my hands up in frustration. “The world thought I was dead, French. For all intents and purposes, I was. Hockey was the last thing on my mind.”

It was the truth, but it was the wrong thing to say to him.

French lost it. “Well, good for you!” he shouted. “I’m so glad you have something else in your life! But some of us don’t!”

Lynx moved between us, holding one hand out toward me in a stop motion and mirroring it in French’s direction. “Listen, nobody needs to get traded. We’ve had some rough weeks.”

“Months,” French spat.

Lynx nodded in agreement. “Okay, that’s fair. This season is a write-off. But we’ll fix this. We’ll get the team back on track. Get some new players to replace the ones who quit, and we’ll talk to the sponsors. We’ll hold a press conference and set everything right. Luca and I are back now, and we can get into the routine again.”

I ground my molars together.

Because I was pretty sure none of that was going to happen. Not when James wasn’t here. We’d promised Nyah we wouldn’t leave again, and clearly Lynx was taking that to heart.

But I couldn’t stay here for a hockey team.

And I couldn’t stay here solely for Nyah either.

Because I’d meant it when I’d tattooed James’s name on my skin.

He’d already become a piece of my heart, and staying here in Saint View, having to stare into Nyah’s eyes, knowing it was my fault our son wasn’t here, was too much for me to bear.

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15

NYAH

Dear Diary,
I didn't know a single video could save me and destroy me.

Both beds now occupying Luca's room were cold when I woke up from an afternoon nap. I blinked in the gloom of the rainy, overcast day, trying to clear my vision and groped around the bed, searching for Dax or Lynx or Luca.

Or for James.

Only to be reminded I didn't have any of them.

My heartbeat spiked, and a muggy sweat broke out along my spine. I couldn't help the gasp that escaped my lungs, the panic racing through my system.

Luca stuck his head out of his enormous walk-in closet. "Hey. I'm here. You good?"

If it had been Lynx or Dax they would have come running over to me, eager to hold me until I calmed down. It had been Dax who'd lain beside me, night after night, and battled my nightmares with me.

Luca just looked at me like he knew his presence alone was enough. It made me laugh. He was such an arrogant prick.

But I was so glad he was home.

I was still naked. We'd all showered after our little reunion in the hot tub the night before, and none of us had put on clothes before we'd tumbled into bed. Luca and Lynx had gotten up and gone to the rink early, but I hadn't moved much from the bed all day. Dax had brought me some food, and then I'd fallen right back to sleep.

It felt like the first solid, deep sleep I'd had in a long time, my body craving it and trying to catch up now that all three of the men I loved were home with me.

I drew the black silk sheets up around my breasts and drew my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them while I watched him putter around.

"Lynx and Dax went down to the gym." He tossed a shirt into the mouth of the closet, a pair of jeans following soon after. "They've been gone awhile. Should be back soon."

"You didn't want to go work out?"

"Are you telling me I'm getting pudgy?"

I pulled the sheet off the bed, wrapping it around myself, and walked into his closet so we didn't have to keep shouting at each other. "You're anything but pudgy."

I took in his shirtless chest. He'd lost weight if anything. He'd always had a lot of long, lean muscle, but his face was so sharply chiseled now it was obvious to me he hadn't been eating well.

I was so distracted by the fact I could see the outline of his ribs that it took me a moment to realize exactly what he was doing. And even then, I had to ask him to confirm it. "Are you…packing?"

He paused in the middle of folding a sweatshirt he'd just taken off a hanger. He grimaced but nodded.

My heart sank, and my words came out barely more than a whisper. "You said you'd stay."

He turned away, clearly not wanting to meet my eyes. "I can't stay, Nyah. I want to, fuck knows I want to more than anything. But I can't. Not until he's home."

His weight loss was right there in front of me. The proof that being out on the road, right after being kept prisoner, was eating away at him. "You and Lynx haven't been home in over a month. You have an entire army of your father's—of your—men out searching for him. That's what you told me."

He shook his head. “It’s not enough.”

I stared at him. Counted the bumps on his spine, trying to calm the rising anger inside me. But when I got to the last one, I was still no calmer than I’d been when we’d started the conversation.

I tucked my sheet in on itself a little tighter, then reached for the suitcase I’d brought my clothes in when I’d first moved into the Guerra mansion. Dax had brought all my clothes and belongings into this room weeks ago, because I couldn’t bear to step foot into my old room. That room still held all the memories of my baby growing inside me, the baby book Lynx had given me still stashed away in a drawer, beside the half-finished pregnancy vitamins.

I unzipped my suitcase and started throwing my own clothes into it.

It had the desired effect. Luca stopped packing and stared at me. “What are you doing?”

“Packing. What does it look like? If it’s not enough for your men to handle it, then I need to be out there too.”

He covered my hand with his so I couldn’t yank any more of my clothes from the shelf. “You’re one person, Nyah.”

I turned and stared up at him. “So are you.”

He sighed and dropped the sweatshirt at his feet so he could scrub his hands over his face.

I knew he was in agony. But so was I. I’d stayed here in this house for the past six weeks, knowing I needed time to recover. Knowing if I tried to go out there, exhausted, bleeding, my stitches needing medical supervision, and my mind trying to recover from the trauma, that I’d only be in the way. That he and Lynx couldn’t do what needed to be done if they were constantly worrying about me.

So I’d spent six weeks fighting every instinct in my body that screamed for my son. Every nerve ending wanted to go after them. To be on the road, to feel like I was doing something to contribute. To feel like I was getting closer.

I’d listened when they’d asked me to stay behind. Not because I wanted to. But because it was what was best for finding James. Because I’d trusted Luca and Lynx knew what needed to be done.

I pulled Luca’s hands away from his face. “You’ve been telling me for weeks your guys will find him. Is that not true anymore? Be honest.”

His expression filled with pain. “I want it to be. I want to promise you they’ll find him. But I don’t think it is. We should have found him by now.” He shook his head. “But I can’t have you out there.”

“I’m healed. I ate all the good food. Rested. I’m good.”

His fingers dug into mine, forcing my attention on him. “It’s not that. I know physically, you’re good. I can see that.” He stared at me miserably. “You have no idea how heartbreaking it is to get a lead, then by the time you get there, nothing. No sign of them. It’s nearly destroyed me more than once. I can’t do that to you. It’s cruel.”

Tears formed behind my eyes, and I swallowed down the growing lump in my throat. “I didn’t realize you’d gotten that close. You never said…”

He ducked his head, so we were eye height. “I never wanted to get your hopes up.”

My voice cracked. “It’s just as hard having none.”

He looked like I’d taken a knife and shoved it right into his gut, twisting it for good measure. But then he nodded and took his phone from his pocket. He tapped the screen a few times and then handed it to me.

A video was cued, a white triangle in the middle waiting for me to push it to start the footage rolling. I glanced at Luca. “What’s this?”

He nodded at it. “Gas station footage from last week. We only got it two days ago. Almost five days too late for us to do anything with it.” He eyed me. “You don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to. But I just want you to understand, I never asked you to stay here to make it easier for me, or because I thought you were incapable of doing what Lynx and I’ve been doing. It was always because I wanted to spare you pain.”

My fingers trembled. But I had to know what he’d seen. I hit play on the video and gasped as I made out Enzo’s form at a gas pump, filling an SUV. He wore a baseball cap low on his forehead, and he avoided looking at the surveillance cameras, but I would have known his face anywhere.

I saw it every time I closed my eyes. There was no escaping it.

I watched it for long seconds that felt like hours, my mouth trying to form the words my heart was too scared to say.

I wanted to ask where James was. If Enzo was alone, where the hell was my son?

And then the back door of the SUV opened, and a woman stepped out.

A tiny baby in her arms.

Screaming filled my ears, and it took Luca engulfing me in his arms and holding me tight to realize the screams were mine. I bit down on my tongue, trying to fight the hysteria that rose inside me at seeing my tiny baby in the arms of another woman. A stranger.

The phone shook in my fingers so badly I could barely make out the little movements of James's arms and legs. I realized, despite the video having no sound, that he was screaming too.

"I'm going to be sick," I whispered through tears that streamed down my face.

The video cut out, and I instantly hit play again, this time zooming in on his tiny screwed-up face.

I'd had barely any time with him, but it didn't matter.

I knew him.

He was the missing piece of my heart, existing without me.

On attempting to watch it a third time, while my heart was so completely shattered all I could do was try to breathe in between sobs, Luca took the phone and scrolled to another image.

"This was from another day. From a motel security camera in a different state. I saved this one to circulate to the guys so they knew the face of the little boy they were all out searching for." He swallowed thickly. "I was wrong for not sending it to you too."

I traced my finger over the screen. This image of James was clearer, the image taken during the day when there was more light so it wasn't dark and grainy like the gas station footage.

The zoomed-in photo of James settled me. His dark eyes stared right into the camera, like he'd known it was there, or that at some point I'd be watching it. His button nose was so perfect, his rosebud lips so sweet.

He wasn't crying in this image, and he appeared clean and warm, and it gave me hope that the woman traveling with Enzo was at least taking care of his basic needs. "He has hair…I don't know that I realized that. He was covered in blood and amniotic fluid, and I only got to hold him for a second." My face crumpled. "What kind of mother doesn't even know if her baby has hair or not?"

Luca just held me tighter, whispering that none of this was my fault.

And yet it felt like it was. "It was my job to protect him," I whispered. "I'm his mother, and I couldn't." I stared up at Luca. "We have to go to wherever this video was taken. They can't be that far."

Luca shook his head. “We already did. There was no trace of them. And they’re moving fast, skipping from state to state. We’ve been one step behind the entire time.” He sighed. “What we’ve been doing isn’t working. And the answer isn’t either of us going back out there. We need more than just my men. We need every person, everywhere, searching for Enzo. I want to make it so he can’t hide. So wherever he goes, someone will recognize him.”

I nodded slowly, agreeing wholeheartedly. But I didn’t know how to make that happen. “We need the police to put out one of those missing person alerts, except they don’t care. Half of them have to be in Enzo’s pocket. How else would they have gotten Lynx out of jail? When Dax and I reported James missing, they told us Enzo has the right to take his son wherever he wants.”

Luca’s hand slammed against the closet wall sharply. “Not his son! Our fucking son! Ours!”

I blinked. “I know.”

He breathed out a long breath, clearly trying to settle his emotions. “So we need the entire world to know Enzo’s face. For our search party to go from a hundred men to millions. So no matter which state he goes to, someone will recognize him.” He slowly raised his head. “I think I have an idea.”

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16

LUCA

Dear Diary,
X handled the awkward questions better than I did. That's deeply concerning.

There wasn't much that was nice in Saint View, but the hockey rink was one of the few new buildings, and therefore, wasn't ready for a bulldozer. I doubted anyone would have called it state-of-the-art, but it was a hell of an improvement over the old one, which still stood, growing more and more derelict every day.

We passed it on the way to the press conference. I walked into it with Lynx at my side, Nyah and Dax just behind us, who'd insisted on coming along for support.

I'd hired the largest conference room in a coworking space, since the rink might have been nice, but definitely didn't have a room big enough for the amount of press I'd invited to come along. Not unless I'd been willing to set up chairs on the ice. Which might have been a nice gimmick, but I couldn't afford a lawsuit if one of the journalists or photographers slipped in their kitten heels and fell.

They all sat in rows, the staff at the coworking space having pushed the table to one end of the room and filling the rest of it with chairs.

The questions started as soon as we walked in, but I ignored them all, my gaze too focused on the front of the room, where French, Devenish, and X sat at a table decorated with a Saint View Vipers logo.

X spotted us and waved excitedly, practically bouncing on his chair.

French's reaction was decidedly less golden retriever and distinctly more black cat. His jaw clenched, and he turned away.

"What are they doing here?" I asked Lynx beneath my breath.

He looked over at me in surprise. "It's a team press conference. I figured we should have at least a couple of the players here."

Dax snorted at X posing for one of the photographers. "What was the reasoning behind inviting him?"

Lynx gestured in X's direction. "For this. Everyone loves him."

"Not sure they'd still love him if they knew he attended Murder Squad group meetings whenever he was feeling stabby…" I mumbled.

Lynx elbowed me. "Don't call it that, especially not here where people might overhear. And can you try smiling? Why are you in such a bad mood anyway? This press conference was your idea."

"They weren't supposed to be here." I nodded toward the table.

Lynx stopped. "The team is worth saving."

I sighed heavily and pushed past him. "We'll see if you still feel like that at the end of this."

His eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "What does that mean?"

I shook my head. He'd see soon enough.

I took one of the empty seats, leaving the one next to French for Lynx. Dax and Nyah both stood against the side wall, next to a woman I was pretty sure was French's sister. She beamed at him proudly and leaned in to whisper to Nyah, before flashing French a very sisterly thumbs-up. Nyah gave me an encouraging smile, like she thought I might be nervous or something.

She was right. I was. But probably not for the reasons she thought.

One of the staff members handed me and Lynx microphones, and the entire table turned to me, waiting for me to kick things off. "First, I want to thank—"

The reporters clearly weren't interested in pleasantries. One shouted out, interrupting me. "Luca Guerra. You're the team owner, but you were reported dead just a couple of months ago."

I brought the microphone to my mouth. “As you can see, very much not dead.”

“So how do you explain your father telling the world you were?”

I spoke as deadpan and dryly as I possibly could. “There was a miscommunication. But we aren’t here to talk about that today.”

“Let’s talk about the Vipers’ sharp decline to the bottom of the competition then. You have to admit, you guys have sucked the last few months.” The smart-mouthed reporter winked at me. “Or were you too dead during that time to notice?”

I opened my mouth to answer but didn’t even get a chance before other reporters chimed in.

“French! How does it feel to be on a team where the only person performing is your mascot?”

French crumpled the tablecloth in his fingers.

X grinned and pumped his fist in the air. “Go Vipers!”

When none of us on the table expanded, he leaned forward to speak into his microphone. “It’s really such an honor for the team to work with me. My speed and agility out there on the ice has been much admired.”

The reporters all laughed.

Anyone who had seen X stumbling around on the ice would have.

X grinned and waved them off. “No, seriously. The guys on the team have become my best friends.”

“I thought the duck was his best friend,” Lynx whispered to me.

I bit my lip, trying to bite back a laugh.

French shot us a look and clapped a hand on X’s shoulder, the media-trained athlete in him coming out to shine. “There’s no doubt about our mascot being the heart and soul of this team. And you’re right, at the moment, he’s the main reason anyone is still coming to our games. It’s no secret we’ve had some troubles behind the scenes, but with our coach back __”

Everyone turned to Lynx. “Where have you been?”

Lynx cleared his throat. “Uh, I had some personal things come up that took me away from the team for a bit.”

A reporter at the back of the room stood. “Is it true you were arrested?”

French whipped his head around to stare at Lynx, covering the microphone with his hand, like that might stop the entire room from hearing him hiss, “Is that fucking true?”

Lynx stared at me helplessly.

This entire conference was wildly spinning out of control. This was exactly why I hadn't wanted to talk to the press in the first place.

But now, I needed them.

I stared at the reporter in the back row, though I was well aware of all the others recording me. "Truth is, Mr. Randall. While I would love to sit here and talk hockey with you, that's not why I called this press conference."

All the men sitting along the table stared at me.

French shook his head and shoved his seat back, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're unbelievable."

Lynx muttered beneath his breath, "What the fuck, Luca?"

Randall, the reporter at the back of the room, raised an eyebrow. "Then why exactly are we here?"

I glanced over at Nyah, and like she could read my mind, her mouth formed a little O of surprise. But she quickly recovered, nodding once at me, giving me her permission.

I faced the journalists again. "About six weeks ago, my son was born." I held up my hand before any of them could interrupt to question me further. "I didn't even get to meet him because within minutes of his birth, my son was taken from his mother, against her will. So that's where I've been." I motioned toward Lynx. "It's where we've both been for the last six weeks." I sucked in a breath, choosing my next words carefully, not wanting to out Lynx or Dax or Nyah for the sort of relationship we had. Whatever the four of us had become was nobody's business but our own. "We've been searching for my son."

A reporter managed to get a question in. "Is this true, Coach?"

Lynx nodded to the crowd. "It's true."

Randall frowned at him. "So you're telling us both the owner and the coach of the team completely abandoned them to go looking for a baby? While I'm sympathetic and do hope the baby is okay, if this is Mr. Guerra's son, was it really necessary for Coach to go as well? Surely you had a responsibility to your team for at least one of you to stay behind? Your players were counting on you."

Lynx glanced over at me, and something passed in his eyes. The same something that had been there when he'd told me he loved me. Beneath the table, he put his hand on my leg, and I dropped mine to cover it.

Not to hide it from anyone. I had never wanted to hide what we were, I'd just had no choice because the world I'd grown up in, my father, my uncle, none of them would have accepted the two of us being together.

I just wanted to keep his hand there, no matter who saw.

Lynx answered the reporter's question. "I couldn't just stay behind. Because he's my son as well."

Well, didn't that just blow up the room like nothing else we'd said. French did a double take, but then his gaze dropped to where Lynx's hand gripped mine, and a little of his anger faded.

"Who's the mother? Who's the biological father? How long have you two been a couple?"

Fuck. Sweat broke out across the back of my neck. This wasn't what I had intended at all. I definitely hadn't called a press conference to confess to the world that I was in some sort of poly quad. Fuck. Is that what this was?

And yet, it felt weird to let them all think it was just me and Lynx in this relationship. When we both knew full well we didn't work without Nyah, and that she couldn't be with us without Dax.

Dax, who was the biological father of this baby I already loved so fucking much I'd blown up my entire life for him.

I didn't dare look at Nyah for fear that if this wasn't what she wanted, the entire room would know just from that one glimpse.

I didn't have to. She stepped forward, her fingers wrapped around Dax's. "I'm his mother."

Dax lifted his chin. "I'm also his father."

I expected another round of shouted questions and chaos.

And yet, Dax's words seemed to have shocked them all into silence. They just stared at us.

X adjusted his microphone. "For legal reasons, I'd just like to clarify I'm not one of the fathers. I barely remember to feed my duck."

The entire room laughed, and there was an easing of the pressure I felt weighing down on my shoulders. X was actually a terrific father, and his duck was fat enough for me to think, if anything, he overfed it. But I appreciated his white lies and drawing the attention away from us for the minute it took for me to compose myself.

I raised my hands. "Listen, this isn't what we came here to say. I know you all probably have a lot of questions, and I swear, we'll answer as many

of them as we can.”

I looked down the line at French and Devenish and X. “I know we’ve let you guys down. And I’m really fucking sorry about that. But our son…”

French shook his head. “You don’t have to say anything else. You should have told us there was more to you going AWOL than we knew. He’s your kid. How can we help?”

The corner of Lynx’s mouth flickered up.

The reporters all took their lead from French. One by one, they all turned back to me, each of them nodding. There was a ripple of words, each of them repeating the sentiment. “Yes. How can we help?”

I swallowed hard. Because this is what I’d called this conference for. I’d asked them all to come here with the intention of storming in, making demands, telling them exactly how it was going to be.

And instead, in the last few minutes, I’d let myself be vulnerable. I’d shown the world something real.

And now people wanted to help.

Not because they’d been blackmailed or threatened. Not because they were scared of the Guerra name I’d never be able to escape.

But because they cared about a family that had lost their child.

For some reason, I focused on Randall again. “Can I make a statement? About the baby? I promise, after that, we’ll actually talk about hockey.”

Randall and all the others nodded. Their silence suddenly respectful and hushed, like they honestly wanted to know what I was going to say.

I couldn’t look at all of them at once, but my gaze kept drawing back to the man in the back row.

He leaned in to whisper something to the camera guy he’d brought with him, and then he nodded at me.

I stared into the lens and wished I’d prepared a speech. But I hadn’t. I’d organized this entire thing in a hot-headed rage and hadn’t given much thought to the details.

It wasn’t hard to get that anger back though. I felt it in the way Nyah took my hand and squeezed my fingers. In the way Dax stood stoically beside her, a man who’d already lost his mother and couldn’t live through the pain of losing a child as well. In Lynx outing himself to the world, if it meant people understood that James was ours.

And someone had taken him.

“I’m Luca Guerra, and I’m asking for your help. Six weeks ago, my uncle, Enzo Guerra, took my newborn son, and he’s been on the run ever since. We’ve tracked him through multiple states, getting close but never close enough.

“Our son’s name is James, and he needs his mother.” I fought the lump rising in my throat. “And we need him home.” I hardened something inside me before it could consume me and I couldn’t talk. “So, Enzo, I’m asking you to give yourself up. To walk into the nearest police or fire station and hand over the baby unharmed. You have twenty-four hours to do that.”

Randall lifted his gaze from his notepad, surprise in his expression. “Sounds like there might be more to that ultimatum. What happens if he doesn’t?”

My jaw clenched. “If he doesn’t, then I ask everyone watching this to help us. I’ll pay a million dollars to any person who brings my uncle and my child back to me.”

Randall blinked and then faced the camera. “A huge, desperate call from millionaire owner of the Saint View Vipers, Luca Guerra, tonight. But one I get the impression he’s good for. And who could blame him? Wouldn’t we all pay a million dollars for our children if we had it? And the Guerra family definitely has it. All I can say is, if I was Enzo Guerra right now, I’d be pretty damn scared.”

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17

NYAH

Dear Diary,
I can never look at a fruit bowl the same way again.

The reporters didn't waste a minute. Within an hour of Luca staring down the camera and putting a bounty on his uncle's head, one that would ensure the entire world knew Enzo's face, the press had the story plastered everywhere.

Each one had a slightly different spin on it. Randall had almost completely avoided mentioning the four of us were in a relationship, instead focusing on Luca's family and the bad blood between them.

Other sources had homed in on the team aspect and how all of this would affect the Vipers for the rest of the season.

But most were delighted to spill all our family business to the world. The twenty-four hours we'd given Enzo to turn himself in came and went, as we'd expected it would, but the headlines went on for days. Lynx dropped one on the kitchen table over breakfast, with a laugh that had only come after days of living this nightmare.

"Look, I'm the star of this one."

I peered over his shoulder and read it out loud for Luca and Dax to hear. "*Saint View Vipers in Crisis after Coach Admits: The Baby is Mine too.*"

Dax smiled around his coffee mug. “My personal favorite is still, *Team Owner ‘Back from the Dead’ Reveals He’s Raising a Child with Coach, Tattoo Artist, and Mafia Princess.*”

“Still dirty they stole my nickname,” Luca muttered.

Lynx patted him on the back. “It’s not like it was very original to begin with.”

It was only funny because if it wasn’t, I’d cry. “I like that they dug a little deeper on my background for that one, you know? Shows they aren’t lazy. What’s your favorite, Luca?”

He sipped his coffee. “I’m partial to the simple, yet biting, *Vipers Season Still Not as Messy as the Owner’s Personal Life.*”

Dax laughed and leaned back on his chair. “I like the snark in that one. But I think it’s working. The store has been busier than ever this week, and every person who’s come in has asked about James.”

I poked at a piece of toast I’d slathered with jam. “There’s a massive pile of flowers and balloons and baskets with teddies outside the gates now. I had Viktor bring some of the cards in, and they all say lovely things, hoping James is home soon.”

Luca had brought home a skeleton crew of his men, including Viktor and Bruno, to help manage the new attention focused on us since the press conference.

Lynx rubbed the back of his neck distractedly. “Liam getting involved as our lawyer and releasing that video of Enzo and James and that woman at the gas station was a good move. You can see James crying, and that’s really tugged at people’s heartstrings.”

Liam Banks, Hayden’s brother, and the lawyer everyone at the Slayers used for any legal problems, had called us as soon as he’d seen the footage from our press conference. He’d offered some free legal advice, and we’d all quickly agreed that sharing the video we had of James and Enzo and the woman was a smart move.

We needed the public to put faces to the names. And even though we had other footage, where James looked well cared for and content, Liam had ruled out using those. He explained we were trying to sell emotion and needed every mother out there to feel like James was her baby. Mothers knew the pain it caused when your child was hurt or scared or injured.

And so I’d agreed to release the footage where James looked distressed.

Even though it had sent me into a dark, downward spiral to see that footage plastered on every news channel.

I needed my son's face out there, but every time that video played, it cost me something.

My phone buzzed with an incoming message I was grateful for because it gave me something else to do, other than sit in my grief. Violet's invitation to join her and her men for a dinner out came at exactly the right time. I flashed the screen at the guys. "Dinner with Violet and crew? X's mom was apparently desperate for some grandkid time. She's convinced them to get out of the house for a night."

Apart from Levi and Lynx, my guys weren't particularly close with Violet's, but all three of them nodded eagerly. I suspected they were feeling as closed in by these four walls as I was. Especially after barely leaving them for the last few days in an attempt to avoid the paparazzi who had stalked us endlessly.

"It's probably about time we showed our faces," I mused. "It's been fine to keep them guessing for a few days while we recouped, but we want the story to stay alive for as long as possible."

"The four of us being seen out together should do the trick." Dax stood, put his finger beneath my chin, and tilted my face up so he could kiss me. "Mmm. Your lips taste like jam."

"You could call in sick to work and see if other parts of me also taste good," I whispered.

He groaned, deepening the kiss so our tongues stroked together. But he eventually pulled back. "Tonight. After dinner, I'm coating your pussy in that jam just so I can lick it off." He walked backward toward the door. "See you all tonight."

I turned to Lynx and Luca. "What about you two? Got plans for the day?"

Lynx eyed me with a wicked grin. "I had none until Dax put the idea of licking jam off you in my head."

Luca sniggered. "Same. But then I started looking at all the other food out here and wondered what else could go with it."

He eyed the fruit bowl in the middle of the table and then winked at me suggestively.

I laughed at them both. "You just trying to make a fruit salad out of my body?"

Luca tilted his chair onto its back legs, folding his arms across his chest while he studied me. His collared shirt was rolled to his elbows and enough buttons undone to show off the patch of dark hair on his chest. “I was kind of thinking more about what sorts of fruit I could eat out of your body.”

I shook my head at him. “You’re a dirty, dirty man, Luca Guerra.”

He grinned, plonking his chair down again and resting his elbows on the kitchen table. “Maybe. But why are you looking at me like you’re hoping I’ll do it?”

I squeezed my thighs together, because of all the things I’d done in bedrooms, and other places with men, I’d never had someone make a suggestion like this.

Oddly, it got me kind of hot. I stood and went to walk away so he wouldn’t see the way I was reacting to his mouth.

Lynx caught my arm, pulling me down on his lap. He plucked a strawberry from the fruit bowl and ran it over my lips. “We got nowhere to be ’til dinner. I’m in the mood for fruit.”

I bit down on the strawberry, biting off half of it then chewing and swallowing. “It’s good. You want the other half?”

He nodded. “I do, but I want to know what it tastes like after I put it between your legs.”

My nipples pebbled at the imagery that produced in my head.

Me laid out on the kitchen table, legs spread wide, Lynx teasing me with fruit, pulsing it just slightly inside me, just enough that I could soak it in the juices already building between my legs.

I bit off the last of the strawberry, taking him by surprise, then leaned in and whispered into his ear, “Do it.”

I didn’t need to tell him twice.

He pulled the tie on my bathrobe, so it was easy to slip out of. He kissed me as he dragged my nightie up my legs, giving it a sharp tug to free it from beneath my ass. And then it was over my head and on the floor somewhere, leaving me naked on Lynx’s lap with all of our breakfast food still sitting on the table.

Luca made short work of that, clearing plates and glasses while I devoured Lynx’s mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing myself to him, loving the way it felt to have him fully clothed while I was so very naked. His fingers trailed up and down my skin, teasing me with

featherlight touches, but all I could think about was what they were going to do to me once there wasn't a fork left on the table to poke me in the ass.

I didn't have to wait long. Lynx was just as aware of Luca as I was, and once the table was free of everything but the fruit bowl, Lynx fit his big fingers around my hips, sitting me up on the edge of the table and kissing me one more time before he pulled away.

"Lie back, Nyah."

I sucked in a wobbly breath, laced with need, and did as I was told. The elegant wooden table was more than strong enough to take my weight. It was cold beneath my back, but the house was warm, the closed-off kitchen cozy.

I tried not to remember the fact I'd baked with Dax's mom in this kitchen before she'd died.

And now we were about to defile it in ways I couldn't even imagine.

I hoped she was happy for me.

And that she couldn't see any of what was about to happen from whatever heavenly, or ghostly, realm she might now be inhabiting.

My gaze met Luca's as he cut open a mango and pressed his thumbs into the soft, maybe slightly overripe flesh. He squeezed a handful of it over my tits, the sweet juice dripping from his fist onto my skin.

I shivered at the contact, each splash of liquid cold on heated skin, my anticipation inching higher and higher, the juice covering my nipples. He licked each of his fingers one by one, eyes locked on mine while he tongued the juice off me too.

I closed my eyes, losing myself to the sensation and soft rasp of his tongue all around the swell of my breast.

He stopped. "Watch me lick you, Nyah."

I moaned, opening my eyes, watching him. His tongue darted out, circling my nipple, licking up the trail of juice. My tits wobbled with every movement of his mouth, and I was a sticky mess of need by the time he finally sucked me into his mouth.

"Oh God." I arched my back a little, thrusting my tits up toward his too-talented fingers. His mouth was hot and wet and felt way too good against the chill of the fruit juice.

Lynx watched us for a few minutes, letting Luca get me warmed up, but he kept good on his promise. Luca had as much of my left breast in his

mouth as he could, the right encased by his hand, while Lynx pushed apart my legs.

Something cool touched the inside of my thigh, and I gasped out loud, lifting my head to stare down my body at him.

He smiled softly, trailing the small, red fruit across my skin, sliding it, rolling it, each pass getting closer and closer to my pussy. He spread my lower lips and watched me as he took the fruit into his mouth to suck on.

It found my clit next. An odd sensation, though pleasant.

But I knew both of us were really just waiting to get to the main event.

My legs trembled with anticipation, and he didn't make me wait long. The strawberry was at my entrance, then slicking through my arousal. I closed my eyes, so ridiculously turned on.

I had no idea how I would tell Violet about this later.

But I was so telling her.

The strawberry nudged in and out of my opening, and then Lynx brought it to his mouth to suck on.

"Fuck, Nyah," he groaned. "I can't believe you're letting us do this. This is the best fucking strawberry I've ever eaten in my life." He kissed my pussy, licking his tongue over my clit. "I want to put them all inside you then fish them out with my fucking tongue."

I moaned, digging my heels into the table and raising my ass off the wood, splaying my knees wide. He grabbed me, hooking his thick, tattooed arms around my thighs and bringing me to him, devouring me, his tongue taking the place of the strawberry and diving inside me.

I fumbled blindly for the bowl, finding another strawberry and crushing it over my mound.

He devoured that, licking it off me and took another handful of them.

Luca's mouth never eased up on my tits, but the show belonged to Lynx and what he was doing between my legs.

He slid sticky, strawberry-stained fingers inside me, pumping them in and out, while his tongue licked every inch of strawberry juice that had trickled down from my mound and over my clit. It dripped down my inner thighs, and his tongue traced all over it while his fingers hit my G-spot over and over.

Strawberries were pushed inside my pussy, only to be taken out and devoured. He fed as many to Luca as he ate himself, each one coated in my juices.

I felt like a dirty whore and a sex goddess all at once.

Not for one second did I consider asking them to stop. Every ounce of my body wanted this.

“Fuck,” I groaned, staring at Lynx with his lips stained pink from the berries. “I can’t believe you’re eating fruit that’s been in my pussy.” I couldn’t help but laugh because Violet was actually going to die when I told her about this.

Lynx grinned at me. “We haven’t even started with the bananas yet.”

I laughed, but I was kind of intrigued.

Luca groaned into my breast. “Don’t look at us like you’re wondering if we actually could fuck you with a banana.”

I lifted onto my elbows so I could see better. “But aren’t you kind of curious now? Like, would it be hard enough? Or would it just turn into mush?”

Lynx stood, undoing his pants, a grin on his handsome face. “I think I’ll just fuck you with my banana instead.”

Luca shoved him. “You did not just say that. If guys can get the ick, you totally just gave it to me.”

Lynx took his cock out and waved it toward Luca’s face. “Eat my banana, Luca.”

There was more teasing, but I felt something deep inside me relax. Muscles I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding too tight.

I laughed, enjoying that this had gone from deeply erotic to fun and playful. I wanted that in my partners. Sex was supposed to be fun.

And apparently, discussing whether the bananas in the fruit bowl were ripe enough to use as a dildo was fun to me.

I reached for Lynx, wrapping my fingers around his “banana” and guiding him to my entrance. “Stop flirting with him and fuck me.”

He leaned over me and ran his tongue up my neck. “Say less.”

He slid into me, and I shouted at the intrusion. He was so much bigger than the strawberries or his fingers. I bit my lip, shifting my hips to meet his thrusts. He sank deep into each one, and it was delicious.

I turned my head, finding Luca standing beside us, his gaze wandering all over my well-sucked nipples and my body that held only the remains of the fruit they’d smeared all over me. “Want to double banana me?”

He stared at me. “Well, now you’ve both given me the ick. Look.” He undid his pants. “You’ve shriveled my hard-on.”

I laughed at him because he was full of shit. His dick was rock-hard, and I ran my hand up and down his length, stroking the velvet of his skin. He closed his eyes, his abs flexing as he rocked into my grip over and over.

I twisted and grabbed his ass, drawing him to the very edge of the table so I could take his cock in my mouth.

He hissed, sinking inside, and I moaned at the sensation of having Lynx fucking me between my legs while I had Luca's cock in my mouth. I lost rhythm between the two of them, and Luca took over, thrusting into me, driving deep to the back of my throat with his hands in my hair, guiding the tilt and angle of my mouth.

"Fuck," he groaned. "You're too fucking good at that. I need to come."

I wanted him to. Wanted to taste him. I squeezed his balls, reaching my fingers back to stroke the sensitive spot between them and his ass.

His palm hit the table hard, supporting his weight and he shouted, unloading into my mouth, "Fuck, Nyah, I'm going to choke you!"

But he wasn't. He sprayed cum down the back of my throat, and I swallowed it all, licking the tip of him until he was completely clean.

"I can't watch you do that and not need to come too," Lynx bit out, his voice gruff, all traces of laughter gone from his voice.

He leaned over me, covering my body with his, so he could kiss me.

I was sure I tasted of strawberries and Luca's cum, but he just moaned as if he liked it.

Which only turned me on more.

He put his hand between us, stroking my clit, the pleasure inside me already right there, on the verge of being set free. Each thrust of his hips grew faster, harder, until the solid table below us jolted over the kitchen tiles every time it hit Lynx's solid thighs. He'd probably have bruises, but if he was in pain, he didn't show it. His body slammed into mine, his fingers working magic circles on my clit until there wasn't a chance I could hold out another second.

"Oh!" I clutched his arms, digging my fingernails into his back, scratching them down his spine as I fell apart.

I was pretty sure he said something that sounded a lot like, "Oh, thank fuck," and I laughed through my orgasm, because clearly he'd been in agony, trying to hold on but determined to make me come first.

We came together, pulsing and spasming, his body wrapped tight in mine, him kissing me until I couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

All there was, was feelings.

He finally stilled, his body fully spent and lagging against mine. We breathed in time together, and even though I didn't have the energy to open my eyes, I reached out a hand for Luca's.

He put a banana in it.

I opened my eyes and laughed. "Bit late. Already came. What am I supposed to do with this?"

He grinned at me wickedly. "You aren't the only person we could try a banana on."

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18

NYAH

Dear Diary,
Luca watches* Married at First Sight. *I'll never let him live it down.

Dax came home to a clean kitchen, but when we told him why there was no longer any strawberries or bananas left in the fruit bowl, he'd stripped my clothes, laid me straight out on the kitchen counter, and covered me in the jam I'd smeared on my toast that morning.

He'd made Luca and Lynx watch while he licked it off my tits and pussy, even flipping me over to lick it off my asshole. And then he'd fucked me fast and hard from behind while they'd watched, reminding everyone he was a part of this too, and if we fooled around while he wasn't with us, he was sure as hell going to catch up once he got home.

Freshly showered, we'd all piled in the SUV Luca had been driving around, ready for our first dinner out with another foursome.

I'd been on a high all day, and I tried so hard to stay in that vibe. I deserved a break. I'd done nothing but cry and worry and work myself up until I couldn't breathe ever since James had been taken from me. I just wanted one day where I got to feel human.

I'd been so close.

All the sex had been the best distraction, and exactly what I needed. It was really hard to think about anything else other than how good you felt when you were in the middle of multiple orgasms.

But in the darkness of the back seat of the car, while the three guys discussed the latest hockey scores, I felt the sadness creep back in.

The guilt that weighed me down every damn day and so rarely eased. The darkness invited it in, and by the time we pulled up in the nearest parking spot, a few yards away from the entrance of the restaurant Violet had booked, the weight of not having my baby in my arms was back to crushing me. Violet and her men stood outside the door, waiting for us, each of them smiling and happy, probably so thrilled to be having a night off with no kids.

I didn't blame them. Not one bit. I knew none of them had gone on a date since the baby was born. None of them had slept properly or had any time to themselves. Their whole lives revolved around those three kids.

I wanted mine to revolve around James, and yet it didn't because he wasn't here.

I walked toward the woman who had so quickly become my best friend, with a fake smile plastered on my face.

She took one look at me, and she knew without me saying a word. She'd been in the middle of a sentence when the words died on her lips, and she practically ran from her men, beelining for me.

We crashed into each other like we hadn't seen each other in years, both of us holding each other tight, neither of us saying a word because what was there to say? I'm so sorry I have my baby but you don't have yours?

Violet's hug was exactly what I needed.

My guys joined Violet's, and the six of them stood there watching us silently, letting us have the moment we needed.

I eventually pulled back, swiping my fingers quickly beneath my eyes while Violet fanned her face with her fingers.

A flash of light went off to our left, and then another and another, each one blinding me so I couldn't work out what was going on. It took the paparazzi yelling my name for me to realize we were being photographed.

The guys rushed in, forming a circle around me and Violet, protecting us from the descending mob and their cameras.

The restaurant, to their credit, was amazing. Dax signaled to them as we were ushered in, and their maître d' closed the door firmly behind us, with a

glare at the photographers that clearly said, “Don’t even fucking think about it.”

It didn’t stop them from standing right outside the restaurant with their noses pressed to the glass though.

The maître d’ shook his head in disgust, grabbed some menus, and herded us to a back room, out of sight from the front windows.

I sank down into a seat gratefully. “Thank you. And sorry. Hopefully they go away so the rest of your diners can enjoy their meal in peace.”

The man waved his hand, dismissing my apologies. “Don’t be silly. They should be ashamed of themselves, hounding a family whose child is missing.” He gave us a sympathetic yet sheepish smile. “I recognize you all from the news. I really hope baby James is home soon. We’re all rooting for you.” He glanced over at Luca. “That uncle of yours is a real piece of work.”

“Don’t I know it,” Luca mumbled.

He handed the man a generous tip, and he took it with a nod of thanks, assured us our waitress would be here soon to take our order, and wished us a good night.

Silence descended over the eight of us, the guys all looking at me and Violet sitting side by side in the middle of the table, to make sure we were all right.

I sighed out heavily. “Well. This was a good start. We’re all sad and stressed.”

Dax grimaced from his spot on my other side and reached for my hand, squeezing it under the table.

But Violet sat a little straighter, drew her shoulders back, and clapped. “No. Nope! We’re not doing this. We came here to have a good time, and dammit, we’re going to have one.” She glanced over at a waitress hovering in the corner and gave her a warm smile. “Hey there. What’s your name?”

The young woman stepped forward. “Cecelia.”

Violet nodded. “Cecelia. I’m Violet, it’s lovely to meet you. I hate to make demands on you already, but we’re going to need alcohol. A lot of it. Like, not just a cocktail, I’m going to need *pitchers* of cocktails. Is that doable?”

Cecelia nodded quickly. “Of course. We do fabulous margaritas, if I may be so bold as to make a suggestion.”

Violet pointed at her. “You absolutely can be, and I’m going to go out on a limb for all of us and say that sounds amazing.” She linked her arm through mine. “We’re pumping and dumping tonight, baby.”

X’s eyebrows furrowed, and he leaned in so his arm brushed Violet’s, his voice lowered. But because it was X who was never quiet, even his attempt at a whisper was plenty loud enough for all of us to hear. “Omelet…is that code for sex and a shit? This is kind of a nice place; might be a bit inappropriate to talk like that here.”

It took a second for that to register before the entire table burst into laughter.

Violet was laughing so hard she got the hiccups and had to tell X that pumping and dumping was what breastfeeding mothers called it when they expressed milk then threw it away, often done when one didn’t have to feed a baby that night and wanted to have a drink.

X grinned at the new information he’d learned, or perhaps at the fact with a single sentence, no alcohol needed, he’d managed to turn the mood around. I knew from Violet how much X loved the people he loved. He had such a big heart, and he hated seeing anyone sad or upset. Somewhere along the way, he’d realized humor helped, and so even though his jokes were often at his own expense, the outcome being laughter always pleased him.

Violet checked over her shoulder to make sure we had the private dining space to ourselves; Cecelia was busy at the bar getting our pitchers of margaritas together. Violet waved at all of us to stop laughing and settle down. “Okay, so I declare that tonight, we are going to have a good time. Not just because we ordered enough margaritas to drown a small island, but because we all deserve it. So no talk of murders, kidnappings, children, Mafia wars, or serial killers.”

Dax laughed. “Is it a coincidence you put children in with all the others?”

Whip grinned and shook his head. “Wait ’til you have six-year-old twins and a newborn. You’ll understand why they go hand in hand.”

We all knew he didn’t really mean it. Whip excelled at being a father, and the three kids who had come into his life after the deaths of his first wife and older children were his heart and soul.

Cecelia came back with our drinks and poured us all glasses. I took a sip of mine, the fruity liquid sliding down my throat pleasantly. I glanced over at Violet and watched her swallow down a few mouthfuls.

She giggled. “Oh boy. We’re getting drunk tonight, aren’t we?”

I clinked my glass against hers. “Cheers, bestie. Love you.”

She kissed my cheek. “Love you more. Always.”

What might have started as a nice dinner in an upscale restaurant had turned into too many drinks, hysterical laughter, and stuffing our faces with the most delicious Mexican food I’d ever pushed past my lips. It was the sort of dinner we never could have had in the main dining room without someone shushing us. But because we were in a private room, or maybe because Luca had kept the tips generous and flowing, we’d been allowed to make a happy racket.

I took another sip of what had to be my third or fourth drink and waved at everyone to be quiet and listen. “Okay, so admit something true. Something you’ve never told anyone.” I closed my eyes and waved a drunken finger around, hitting Violet’s boob once, which made us both laugh, before settling on a spot somewhere to my left. I opened my eyes, and my finger was pointing at Whip. “Whip! You go first. I bet you have some good stories you’ve never told anyone from your days as a…” I lowered my voice. “Gigolo.”

Violet snorted and slapped my arm. “We don’t call it that! Shh!”

I laughed too, because everything was funny after three margaritas. “Wait, is that politically incorrect? Oh my God, I’m so sorry. Should I have said male prostitute?”

Luca, Lynx, and Dax were in hysterics at my distress. They’d all had more than their fair share of the margarita pitchers. So much so Lynx had eventually claimed a pitcher for himself and just stuck a straw straight in it, forgoing a glass at all.

Through their laughter, nobody gave me any help at all, so I kept trying. “Surely it’s not street walker? Wait, did you actually walk the streets? No, you were too classy for that, I bet.” I narrowed my eyes. “Hooker! No, that’s gotta be offensive. Whore?” I slapped a hand over my mouth. “Someone give me another drink so I shut up. I’m so sorry.”

Whip was laughing so hard he was crying, tears streaming down his cheeks that he wiped away with the back of his hand. “I think drunk Nyah

is my favorite. To answer your question…or questions, I guess, I don't speak for the entire profession, but I was always fine with sex worker."

I slammed my hand down on the table, making Violet jump. "See! There you go! I didn't even think of that. Tell us all the gossip."

He thought on that for a moment. "It was mostly pretty boring, nothing that would interest anyone, but I did get paid one night to insult a woman's husband."

My mouth dropped open. "Insult him? How?"

Whip shrugged. "She gave me a list of things. That he had a chode dick being the biggest one…" He laughed. "Or I guess, smallest one."

"That's so mean!" Violet said, horrified expression on her pretty face.

Whip shrugged. "It was. But they both got off on it… It was kind of weird now that I'm thinking about it."

Dax had a tipsy smile playing all over his perfect mouth. "I once got banned from a craft store."

I squinted at him. "What sort of craft store? Wait, that's not important. Why? How? What did you do?"

X was ready with an accusing taco, waved in Dax's direction. "Please tell me you got caught stealing glitter. That's the gateway drug of the craft world."

Dax folded his arms. "No."

More accusatory taco pointing. "You started a black-market Cricut business?"

"No."

"You got into a fistfight over scrapbook stickers, didn't you? Like some soccer mom took the last pack of seasonal pumpkins and you saw red."

Dax shook his head. "I'm not admitting to anything more than that. Who's next?" He looked at Luca. "I think you have something to confess, don't you?"

Luca swirled his straw around in his drink. "Not that I can think of."

Dax wasn't letting him off that easily though. "Something you confessed to me in that church basement…"

Luca narrowed his eyes and glared at Dax. "A lot of things were said in that church basement, Dax. Things that we swore would never be mentioned again." He gave Dax another pointed stare. "Be cool."

But Dax was well on his way to tipsy town and wasn't having any of it. "You know what I'm talking about."

I put my hand on Dax's arm. I knew he and Luca had gotten close while they'd been held prisoner. I hated the circumstances that had forced them together, and yet I couldn't deny I liked the outcome. The two of them almost more than friends now, though not in the way Lynx and Luca were.

The relationship between Dax and Luca was something different.

Something more like brothers.

And sometimes brothers went too far. I knew that, since I had a few of my own. "Stop. He doesn't have to tell us anything he doesn't want to."

Dax raised an eyebrow at Luca.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'm obsessed with *Married at First Sight*."

I stared at him. "The reality TV show?"

"Yes! Don't judge me! It's a trainwreck I can't look away from, and I've reached a point where I don't even want to."

Lynx seemed equally stunned. "When do you even watch it? We were on the road together for weeks, and I never saw you watch an episode." His eyes widened. "Wait, is that what you were watching every time you put your headphones on? I thought you were just listening to that country band you like—"

X cocked his head to one side, studying Luca like he'd never seen him before. "You like country? Like, yeehaw, trucks, beer, and spin your girl around a dance floor sort of country? Are you secretly a cowboy, Luca?" He glanced over at Whip and Levi. "We should tell Ace. Maybe they can go line dancing together."

The idea of Luca, Mr. Mafia, wearer of suits and scowls, two-stepping around a honky-tonk was hilarious.

Luca gave Lynx the middle finger then extended it to the rest of us. "Are we spilling all my secrets here? Don't forget to tell them I wrote *Sons of Anarchy* fanfic."

I gaped at him. "You…you wrote fanfic?"

He snorted. "No! Of course I didn't."

"But he does secretly watch *MAFS*," Dax threw in. "He ran me through all the drama while we were in that room."

Luca slurped the last of his drink. "I need more alcohol for this." He shot Dax a dirty look. "Traitor."

Dax just clapped him on the back. "Love you."

Luca shrugged him off, but I could see the way the corner of his mouth turned up at Dax's words.

Cuties. I was here for a bromance.

The conversation moved from there to club gossip, and the fact Levi had seen Amber slipping out of Herb's room early one morning was the hot topic of conversation. That was baffling and caused much debate, since Amber had been pretty vocal about her disgust for the Slayers' prospect who was stoned more than he wasn't.

Violet left the table at one point to ask Cecelia something, and I slid into her seat, next to X. I elbowed him, as the others continued the debate around us. "Hey, you."

He grinned over at me and booped me on the nose in the most brotherly way I could have imagined. "Hey, yourself. You having a good time?"

I nodded. I really was. "Yes. But I did notice one thing."

"What's that?"

"You aren't drinking. And neither is Whip and Levi."

He grimaced. "You caught that, huh?"

"Might have." I narrowed my eyes at him in mock suspicion. "I'm assuming it's not because the three of you are pregnant."

X chuckled and patted his stomach. "Would explain the belly I'm getting."

I rolled my eyes. "We both know your abs are about as washboard as they come."

He grinned, lifting his shirt to show them off. "Right? Aren't they great? Levi has me doing his prison workout routines. There's a good reason those guys are so jacked!"

I shoved his shirt down. "Why aren't you drinking though? Are you on a prison diet too?"

He sloshed the probably warm liquid around in his glass, because he definitely hadn't drunk any of it. "Nope. But someone needs to watch over all of you drunkards. And you all needed it more than we did."

I stared up at him. "You're really sweet, you know?"

"When I'm not murdering people?"

I slapped his arm. "Violet said we weren't allowed to talk about that tonight! But yes. When you aren't murdering people. And when you aren't being the class clown. Maybe you should let people see that side of you more often."

X laughed and slung an arm around the back of my chair. "That sounds dangerously close to emotional growth, Nyah. You should probably stop

before I start journaling."

Violet smiled softly at the two of us as she returned, and I slid back into my seat.

She leaned over to whisper in my ear, "What was that about?"

I shrugged. "He's a good one."

She gazed over at her men with a look on her face that spoke of how much she loved them all. "I know. They all are." She nodded toward my three, who were fiercely battling each other over who got the last inch of margarita in the bottom of the pitcher. "So are yours."

"I know." I laid my head on her shoulder, well aware it was a drunk move, but I didn't mind. I was so fuzzy and warm, and it just felt good being surrounded by people I loved. "I love them, Vi. I don't know how the hell I'm supposed to make any of this work, but I love them."

She rested her head on top of mine. "That's exactly why it will work. All you need is love."

"Duh da da da da…" I drunkenly sang, in the tune of the Beatles song.

She laughed. "Well, on that note, before this descends into a karaoke session—"

I grabbed her arm. "Yes! Let's go to karaoke!"

I was drunk. No doubt about that. Because I doubted I would have ever suggested it if I wasn't. But suddenly it sounded like the best idea I'd ever had.

Dax nodded, pulling out his wallet to throw some money down on the table. "So in. I've got an 'Eye of the Tiger' in me for sure."

Luca picked up the money Dax had thrown down on the table, replacing it with his credit card. He handed the cash back to Dax. "Here. I'm paying you not to sing that song."

Dax flipped him the bird.

Lynx mused on the idea for a minute. "I think I'm going to do some Black-Eyed Peas."

Luca screwed his face up at him. "Unless you mean the legume, I'm going to beg you not to. I've heard you sing in the car."

I tossed a soggy piece of lettuce in Luca's direction. "You're such a grump." I pushed my chair back and rounded the table to drag him up from his seat. "We'll find you a good country song to sing. 'Take Me Home, Country Roads'?"

He leaned in, so his warm breath ghosted over my ear. “I’d rather just take you home, princess.”

I shivered at the thought of that, but there would be time later. After I’d sung my little heart out.

I wasn’t ready to go home, where the house was too big, too quiet, and I was constantly reminded that below our feet was a room full of cages.

Cecelia ran Luca’s card, and he protested the entire way out of the restaurant. But Lynx and Dax were on my side, and once we were out on the street, I turned to Violet hopefully.

“You coming?”

She shook her head and hugged me tight. “No. We need to go relieve X’s parents from babysitting duty.” She pulled back and held me at arm’s length though. “The four of you go. But you walk, okay? It’s only a couple of blocks down, and none of you are in any state to drive.”

I kissed her cheek. “Yes, Mom.”

She rolled her eyes and held her hand out. “Keys.”

“We aren’t going to drink and drive, Vi.”

“Of course not, but that also means you are going to have to leave your car here for the night. X or Whip or Levi can drive it back for you and drop it off at your place on our way home, so you don’t have to come get it in the morning.” She laughed at us. “I think your hangovers are going to be pretty nasty, so trust me, you’ll thank us when you wake up.”

She made a fair point, and Luca had given me his car keys to hold. I fished through my bag, searching for them, while muttering about men needing to start carrying purses because why did the woman always end up carrying everything?

I found the key fob, and X plucked it from my fingers before Violet could take it.

“Dibs on driving Luca’s car! That thing is a beast!” He grabbed Violet’s hand, spun her in a little circle beneath his arm, and then dipped her backward, kissing her mouth. “Pick me up from the Guerra place. And then I’ll take you home and show you what a beast I can be.” He growled at her playfully.

She laughed, clearly loving it.

The rest of us screwed up our faces, because X was nothing if not corny. The secondhand embarrassment was real.

But I hugged him, Whip, and Levi quickly, and the guys all shook hands. X asked Luca if his car could get over one hundred, and Violet gave him a look that clearly said he better not try. X promised he wouldn't, but we all knew he probably would.

We waved as Levi, Whip, and Violet piled into their car and started the engine. They waited for X to walk a little farther down the road with us, until he got to the car we'd brought. We said goodbye and kept going, me warm and safe between Lynx and Dax, Luca walking on Lynx's other side.

Luca started humming, and it only took me a second to recognize the opening bars of

"Take Me Home, Country Roads."

I pointed an accusatory finger at him. "Ha! You do want to be a cowboy!"

He grabbed my finger, pulling me over to him so he could kiss my mouth. "I'm never going to be a cowboy, princess. But if you want to be a cowgirl…maybe a reverse cowgirl, I'm happy to give you something to ride…"

I rolled my eyes. "You're the worst." But I felt the blush on my cheeks.

Lynx laughed at him. "Is that seriously your come-on line?"

Luca raised an eyebrow. "Do you have a better one?"

Dax opened his mouth to join in but couldn't get a word out.

A crack of noise split the air so loud all four of us ducked, covering our ears.

Mine rang with a piercing scream of pain, my entire body rocked by some unseen force from behind us.

It took me a second to realize the screaming wasn't just in my head.

It was coming from all around us.

And when we turned to look back, the night sky was lit up in an orange ball of flame.

Completely engulfing the car we'd driven here.

The one X had said he would drive home.

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19

ENZO GUERRA

I hated babies.

I hated whores who couldn't shut them up.

I hated not having any fucking money, and dead-end towns, and wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap everywhere I went because my damn face was plastered all over every social media app and news bulletin.

I hated my motherfucking nephew most of all.

Priscilla fed the baby a bottle in the cracked leather booth, smiling down at him fondly.

Like she'd actually grown to like the little worm. My lip lifted in disgust at the way she cooed at him.

I wanted to go back to when she hated him just as much as I did.

But apparently, anyone with a uterus thought the kid was cute. He attracted attention everywhere we went, either because he was screaming bloody murder or because he was smiling and cooing.

I hated the sound of both.

I was just grateful that all babies looked pretty much the same, so nobody really gave him much of a second glance. At least not in a suspicious way.

Unlike the way they stared at me. We'd sat at this booth for an hour because there was nobody else in the diner besides a bored waitress who was more interested in talking to her boyfriend on the phone. I assumed

there was a cook in the back somewhere, who had fried up the cheap, greasy burgers we'd devoured, but he or she hadn't shown their face once.

If I cooked food that tasted that bad, I wouldn't have shown my face either.

Fuck, I missed nice food. An expensive steak in a nice restaurant with an Old-Fashioned over ice in a crystal glass. I missed dry-cleaned suits—ones that weren't handwashed in the bathtub of cheap motels because I was running out of money so fucking fast that food and a roof over our heads had become the only things I could afford to pay for.

My phone buzzed on the chipped tabletop, and I snatched it up when I saw the withheld number.

If this wasn't the call to say my nephew was dead, I was going to lose my fucking mind.

"What?" I snapped down the line, in no mood for pleasantries.

"Now, now, lad. Is that anyway to answer ye phone when an old friend calls to say hello?"

I screwed my face up. "What do you want, MacGregor? Make it fast, because I sure as hell have better things to do than try to decipher your too-hard-to-understand English."

He chuckled down the line, though I didn't see how anything I had said was funny.

"Seems you've gotten yourself into a wee bit of mischief, haven't ye? On the run with a bairn. The whole country searching for ye after your nephew went and put a million-dollar bounty on ye head." He laughed and whistled down the line. "You're definitely in a pickle, lad."

"Thanks so much for your concern," I said dryly. "If all you rang for was to gloat, I'll be hanging up now."

"Hold your horses, hold your horses. I called to offer my assistance."

I leaned back against the booth, wincing when the cracked leather stabbed me in the back. "Your assistance? What makes you think I'd want your help?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because your nephew has to have the entire Guerra army out hunting ye. Even if ye paid off the police to look the other way, your brother's men will only follow the lead of the next in line. And what a pity that wasn't ye, now, was it?"

I ground my teeth, hating that this asshole could get under my skin.

And that he was right.

I'd stayed a step ahead of Luca, the Guerra soldiers, and the police only by moving around constantly.

It was fucking exhausting, always looking over your shoulder. Always wondering when someone would drag me in for the reward money, or not even bother, and just put a bullet straight through my chest. "Why would I trust you?"

"Ah, see, that's where ye and I have some things in common. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and all that."

Tired, I rubbed a hand over my face. "Just get on with it, MacGregor."

"Aye. Ye aren't one for the dramatics, huh, Enzo? Fair enough. Luca hates me. It's no secret I'd quite like his lass in my bed. But he has all the power right now. Ye and I? We're stronger together. And as I see it, ye need somewhere to lie low. Somewhere your nephew and his men aren't going to come, because I have plenty of men of my own. So, I'm offering ye a place to lay ye head until this all blows over, or until ye can have Luca killed…I assume ye are having Luca killed, are ye not? So ye can actually return with the heir?"

"You're so smart, you figured it all out." The sarcasm dripped from my voice.

But he wasn't wrong. About any of it.

Including how desperate I was getting.

A truck idled in the parking lot outside the window, and I stiffened, recognizing them as the group of red neck bounty hunters who'd been tracking me for the past few days. I could spot them now, the teams who were out there, hoping to make a quick buck by dragging me back to Saint View.

"Get your shit," I hissed at Priscilla. "We're leaving."

She glanced out the window, and her lips pressed into a tight line at the sight of the men circling our vehicle. "Shit."

Yeah, shit indeed.

We were going to have to make a run for it out the back door on foot. Or steal one of the other cars sitting out there in the lot. For fuck's sake. Either way, we needed to leave now.

MacGregor was still on the line. "Got some trouble there, Guerra?"

"You always were so perceptive." I stayed low, out of sight of the window, and shoved Priscilla and the baby toward the back door. Sweat broke out on the back of my neck, the damn thing so stiff it hurt to turn it.

The front door opened, and I knew it would only be minutes before the bounty hunters were on us. I screwed up my face and pressed the phone harder into my ear. Even if we got away this time, there'd be another. And another. As long as that bounty was on my head, then they would keep coming, and eventually one of them would capture us.

I was already completely out of bullets and cash.

I forced the words out of my mouth. "Fine, MacGregor. I'm in some Podunk town called Esther Mountain. Tell me where to go."

I could practically hear the snakelike charm in his voice, the sharp smile I couldn't see but felt anyway. "It just so happens I have a place not too far from there."

"Yeah? You have a place in the middle of nowhere?"

"Eh, my name might not be on the title. We might just be borrowing it from a new friend who was more than happy to accommodate us once we persuaded them with a bullet."

"The address, MacGregor. I've got fucking bounty hunters breathing down my damn neck, ready to drag me back to Saint View at any minute."

He rattled off an address he swore was only a few minutes' drive from my current location.

It made me realize the rednecks weren't the only ones who'd been following me from a distance.

But MacGregor didn't need the million dollars. He wanted the power of ruling a Mafia empire, just like I did.

And yet it was Luca who had that all to himself.

That just pissed me off. MacGregor was right. We were stronger together.

We circled the building, and I peeped out from around the corner. When the coast was clear, the hunters having gone inside to look for us, or hell, perhaps to order food after assuming we'd ditched the car, we doubled back. Priscilla threw the baby into the back, while I snuck to the side of the hunters' truck and rammed my knife into the rubber of a tire.

I grinned at the satisfying hiss of the air escaping and then strolled to my car and got inside it, giving the trackers the middle finger through the windshield when they finally noticed me and came running.

But they were too late. I sailed out of the parking lot, smug and well satisfied knowing they couldn't follow, as they cursed and kicked their flat tire.

“Idiots,” I muttered. “Stupid, redneck idiots.”

Priscillia craned her head back over her shoulder, her ratty blond extensions falling around her face when she turned back to me. She clapped her hands together, the slap of her palms and her nasally voice grating through my ears.

“That was really smart.”

“I know,” I ground out.

She sighed and threw her hands up in the air, her chipped nail polish flashing in the bright sun. “What are you pissed off about now?”

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. I couldn’t stand this woman. Not one thing about her. Her personality was as ratty as the rest of her. “Why did you comment about that being smart?’

Her eyebrows, too dark to match her hair, furrowed together. “What? I don’t know. It was smart. I was giving you a compliment. You’re mad about that?”

I said nothing. It pissed me off that she’d made the comment like she was surprised I’d done it.

It reminded me of the way my brother had always spoken to me. It never mattered what I did or how good my ideas were or how loyal I was to him. It was always met with a raised eyebrow or a condescending pat on the shoulder.

Like I was a good little boy who deserved a participation award for trying.

There’d been no condescending pat on the head when I’d shot him four times in front of everyone he knew.

There’d been no patronizing eyebrow when I’d married his woman, stepped over his dead body, and taken his heir.

The lack of respect his men had shown me sent rage through my blood. They were supposed to be *my* men. This was supposed to be *my* empire. Carlos was fucking useless. Just because he was older, didn’t mean he was more qualified. He hadn’t even been able to organize Luca’s death properly! No balls to kill his son himself, he’d made the deal to have it taken care of.

But I’d been the one with the balls to kill my brother and take his seat.

Luca didn’t get to sit there just because he was blood, when Carlos and I were the ones who had built it all.

I was the smart one. The one who had the good ideas.

And as soon as Luca was dead, I'd come back with *my* son, the true heir to the Guerra kingdom. The one I'd rule for the next eighteen years and well beyond if I had anything to say about it.

They'd see I was the brains all along. That our father might have never noticed me because I'd always been in Carlos's shadow.

But everyone would see me now.

I turned off the highway, onto a dirt road, and followed MacGregor's instructions until I stopped outside an old farmhouse with peeling paint, a few cows in the yard, and nothing much else as far as I could see. I opened the door and slid out, surveying it all with the disgust it deserved.

MacGregor stepped out of the house, crossing the dusty front yard, his arms spread wide. "I welcome ye to my humble abode!"

"Far cry from your castle."

MacGregor chuckled. "Indeed." His gaze flickered past me, and he frowned. "Who's the lass?"

I shrugged.

MacGregor moved past me to the back of the car where the baby lay in its seat. He smiled charmingly at Priscilla and motioned to the brat. "May I?"

Priscilla deferred to me, which was pleasing. At least she was learning that I was fucking in charge here.

I didn't care if MacGregor touched the kid. As long as I didn't have to. I nodded.

Priscilla nudged the baby carrier toward him.

MacGregor stared down at the baby, and a genuine smile spread across his face. "Oh, hello there, wee one." He reached into the carrier and unclipped the baby from his harness. "Let me get ye out so I can see ye. You're a strong lad, aren't ye? You've got thick legs. They're like tree trunks."

The brat cooed at him.

"I wouldn't have picked you to like babies," I said.

"Not all babies. Just this one."

He looked at me, and I saw the change in him too late.

The gun in his hand, hidden beneath the baby's blanket.

The shot came loud and fast, the sound registering before the pain did.

I hit the ground, clutching my neck, my fingers coming away sticky with blood.

Panic coursed through me in a rush, my heart beating too fast, my head a ringing mess, confusion making my brain slow and sluggish.

But there was no missing Priscilla's screams as she ran for the road.

Or MacGregor's face as he peered down at me with interest, watching me bleed out.

Slowly, he grinned and jostled the baby in the crook of his arm, his gun still firmly clenched in the other hand. "Look, James. Our first murder as father and son."

I tried to speak, but the words came out garbled. Blood filled my mouth and spilled over my lips. It poured from the wound in my neck, dripping off my hands and onto the ground.

MacGregor held the crying baby to his chest. He soothed him with gentle pats and a side-to-side rocking motion. "Don't worry, wee one. When your ma hears I have you, she'll come with us. The three of us will live happily ever after in Scotland."

He lowered himself to the dirt, kneeling beside me, his last words more directed at me rather than the baby in his arms. "I'll teach you how to run an empire in a way that doesn't leave you dead in the dirt in the middle of nowhere for the coyotes to eat."

He pressed the gun to my forehead, my gurgles for help going unheard, the squeeze of the trigger the last thing I saw.

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LYNX

Dear Diary,
Surviving one battle doesn't mean you've won the war.

I now knew what déjà vu felt like.

Standing there on the sidewalk, watching yet another of Luca's cars engulfed in flames, felt a lot like standing there watching his car burn the first time.

I grabbed his hand, gripping it so hard he grunted uncomfortably, but he squeezed my fingers back. Like he knew I needed to remind myself he was standing right there next to me, and that he wasn't in that fire.

But X…fuck, X was.

It sank through Nyah's brain quicker than the rest of us, and she lurched forward. "X!"

I grabbed her, hauling her back, not able to handle the thought of her or anyone I loved near those flames. "Hold her!" I shouted at Luca, and then sprinted for the car, not turning back to see if Luca had listened.

I knew he would have. Dax pounded the pavement beside me, both of us running hard, dodging people on the sidewalk just standing there staring.

"Call 911!" I shouted at them.

What the fuck was wrong with these people? When the hell had standing by on the sidewalk, watching and filming on your phone become the norm instead of actually helping?

We reached the fully engulfed car at the same time Levi and Whip did.

All we could do was stand there and stare in horror at a fireball that was clearly meant for us.

“X!” Whip shouted, his voice hoarse. He edged toward the flames, only to be pushed back by the heat.

Levi had his fingers in his hair, helpless despair in his expression.

And then the sweetest sound of all.

“Help! I’m on fire!” X ran from the other side of the car in a blind panic, his arms waving around in the air like one of those inflatable people car dealerships used to attract attention.

All four of us did a double take, like he’d been delivered back to us from the dead.

He stopped in front of us, shouting at the top of his lungs. “Help me! I’m too young to die!”

I put a hand out toward him. “X. Wait—”

“I only just grew my eyebrows back, and the fire captain won’t accept my loyalty punch card!”

Whip tried next. “X! Stop!”

“I have a duck I need to see grow up!”

Levi scrunched up his face. “What about the kids?”

X blinked at him. “They need to see Reggie grow up too!”

We all stared at him for a long second, then burst out laughing.

Though admittedly, it was the sort of laughter that verged on hysteria.

X stopped and put his hands on his hips. “I’m not on fire, am I?”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “No. You’re definitely not. You’re fine.”

I stepped aside as Violet struggled free from the crowd that had been holding her back and threw herself at X.

His demeanor changed instantly, and he cradled the back of her head gently, holding her to him while she sobbed into his shirt.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “I’m okay. Turns out I wasn’t on fire at all. Squirmy and Moe live to see another day.” He rubbed his still slightly patchy eyebrows to prove the point.

She raised her tearstained face up to his. “Thank God for that.” She kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the space between his eyebrows.

“I’m kind of in love with them.”

“Even when they’re slightly singed?”

“I love every part of you. Singed or otherwise.”

X kissed her gently and then put his arm around her, making sure his body was between hers and the fire. Whip and Levi enclosed both between them, and Dax and I stepped back, joining Nyah and Luca a few steps away.

Nyah scowled at me and Luca. “We’re going to have words about what just happened.”

I glanced at her. “We can talk, but I’m not going to apologize for making sure you were safe. I doubt Luca will either.”

“Not a fucking chance,” he practically drawled.

Nyah faced off with Dax, and he shook his head too.

“Don’t look at me. I would have held you back as well.”

She huffed her annoyance with us, and it was so fucking cute I kissed it off her mouth.

Then went back for seconds, pulling her into my arms and kissing her deeply, because all I could think was it could have been…should have been…us in that car.

The thought churned my stomach.

I pulled away, tucking her hand into mine, and we rejoined Violet’s group, all of us staring at the fire while sirens wailed in the distance, surely heading in this direction.

I nudged X, standing beside me. “You okay? What happened?”

He rolled his head to one side and cracked his neck audibly. “I don’t know, exactly. I opened the car door and hit the start button on the dashboard.” His expression turned sheepish. “It’s cold. I wanted to turn the butt warmers on before I actually sat down. But instead of the car starting it made a weird ticking noise.” He shrugged. “It was only gut instinct that had me back away. It sounded like the ticking of a bomb, and that’s never a good thing. The shock wave got me, and I went wheeeee…” He held up his arm, his sleeve torn, his skin cut up beneath it and made his hand fly through the air in an arc before slamming it into his other palm. “I hit the road pretty hard. Rolled like I was in an action movie. Got dizzy. Then hot. Thought I was on fire. And you know the rest.” He looked over at me, his expression serious. “I hate to tell you this, but I think someone tried to kill you guys. They couldn’t have known I’d decide to drive your car home at the last minute.”

Luca sighed heavily.

Dax grimaced. “So, what’s new?”

I hated that he was right. How the hell were we back here again? Carlos was dead. Enzo wouldn’t dare come back here with the level of media coverage he was getting. He’d be spotted instantly if he tried stepping foot back in Saint View or Providence. Both towns were baying for his blood, the “Bring Baby James Home” movement stronger here in our hometowns than anywhere.

But this had Guerra war written all over it. It was exactly what they’d done to Luca once before, and it made sense they’d be targeting us again, since they hadn’t succeeded the first time.

But with neither Carlos nor Enzo here to orchestrate it, I had no idea who had stepped up into their shoes.

Or if maybe we’d been wrong all along.

I’d seen then grief in Carlos’s eyes when he’d spoken at that press conference, confirming his son was dead. I’d thought him a good actor.

But maybe it had been honest. Maybe he truly had thought Luca dead and it was someone else all along.

Either way, it was clear to me we still had an enemy out there. One who still wanted us dead and wasn’t going to stop until they’d achieved it.

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DAX

Dear Diary,
I thought we'd finally made sense of everything. Then Bruno opened his mouth.

We sat in the hospital waiting area until X was given a clean bill of health and discharged into his family's care.

He slapped me on the shoulder as he walked out with a limp and a bandage covering half his face where he'd taken a spray of shrapnel. "Thanks for a great night, everyone! We should do this again soon!"

I squinted at him. "Your rib is fractured, and you had foreign objects removed from your skin."

X grinned, always willing to find the good in a situation. "Yeah, but I did it with my best friends around me. None of you had to sit here in the waiting room but you did." He shrugged. "That's a great night to me."

Impulsively, I hugged him. It wasn't just his words that got to me. It was the fact it could have so easily been Nyah, Luca, and Lynx getting into that car. It was the fact that the odds all four of us would have noticed the ticking and backed off, rather than ignoring it, were slim to none. It was that the mother of my child would probably be dead right now if anyone but X had gotten in that car tonight.

I think the hug took us both by surprise, but he hugged me back.

“Dax?” he whispered as I held on to him, all the things I could have lost tonight running through my mind.

“Yeah?”

“Does this mean you’ll do my next duck tattoo for free?”

I laughed and pulled back. “Yeah, buddy. Your next duck tattoo is on me.”

He fist pumped the air with the arm that already had a very obnoxious design I’d inked into his skin a while back.

Violet and Nyah hugged for a long time, and then they got into their car, and we caught an Uber back to the Guerra mansion.

For some reason, all four of us were slow to get out. The mansion loomed over us, dark and eerie, despite the entrance light that came on as Bruno came to open the door for us.

I knew how the others felt, even though they hadn’t voiced it. “We don’t have to go inside. We can go to my place.”

“Or the clubhouse,” Lynx added.

Nyah sighed. “Or anywhere but here. But what’s the point? The house isn’t the problem.”

“We are,” I said softly.

No one argued with me, which wasn’t surprising but kind of sucked.

I took Nyah’s hand, and she took Lynx’s. Luca’s fingers found his other hand, and I led us all to the door, the four of us walking in as a singular unit because that suddenly felt like the only way we could.

Despite the ungodly hour, we all beelined for the nearest living room, flopping onto couches, while Luca asked Bruno to go get us some drinks.

My head buzzed with an incoming hangover, and a hair of the dog as the sun rose sounded like exactly what I needed.

I didn’t want to sleep.

There were things that needed to be said before I could go to bed. I wasn’t in the mood to sugarcoat any of them. “Should we start a betting pool on how long it’ll be before one of us dies?”

Nyah looked over at me with tired eyes. “Dax…”

Luca sighed. “Ten on within the week.”

Lynx lay back across the couch, putting his head in Nyah’s lap and his feet on Luca’s. “I’ll put my money on two weeks.”

Nyah pulled his hair. “I should tell you not to talk like that, but…”

Luca grinned at her. “You want in on the bet, don’t you?”

“Twenty on within five days.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees so I could scrub my hands over my face. “This is so morbid.”

“It’s dark humor. It’s a tried-and-true coping mechanism.” Luca tugged at one of Lynx’s shoelaces, releasing it from the knot.

Lynx pulled his shoe off the rest of the way. “Maybe we need to actually discuss this without the humor though?”

“And without getting naked,” Nyah added wryly. “I feel like every time we go through something, we get over it by getting horizontal.”

“That’s my favorite way of communicating,” Luca complained.

“We know, manwhore.” I laughed at him, so he knew I was joking.

He threw a middle finger my way, but it was good-natured. “What is there to discuss?” he asked. “People want me dead. It comes with the territory of being a Mafia don. You guys are collateral damage.”

Nyah crinkled her nose. “Is that what you are now? A Mafia don?”

He shrugged. “If you ask me, I’m just Luca—” He levelled me with a stare. “Do not fucking sing that ‘I’m Just Ken’ song from the *Barbie* movie…”

I snorted. “I hadn’t even thought of it. But I’m not drunk enough for karaoke at this point.”

“Thank fuck for that.”

I did hum it for a moment though, just to needle him, because that’s what brothers did.

But I let it go quickly because they were right. We avoided actually talking with jokes and sex.

But nobody was going to be laughing or getting naked if we were dead.

Which was what was going to happen if we didn’t work this entire thing out.

I clapped my hands. “Okay, if the Mafia don of Saint View could focus for a minute, can we rehash this entire thing and try to make some sense of it? Because I’ve been going over and over this in my head for weeks and some things just aren’t adding up.”

Lynx nodded. “The way I see it, this mostly all started with that trip to Scotland, and Dax’s mom’s murder. Right?”

I nodded, swallowing down the grief a mention of her brought up. “We know that was framed to look like Lynx. His lynx marks were carved on her

back.”

Luca tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. “And who would want to kill Virginia and frame Lynx? Say it with me now…my dear old dad. He knew Lynx and I were together. Enzo caught us at that party, and he would have happily run off to tattle on me. Dad was pissed after what happened in Scotland. He thought I was stealing his woman, and I’d waged war. So what better way to hurt me than murdering the only woman who’d ever really been a mother to me, and taking down the man I was fooling around with at the same time?”

I nodded. “Not to mention killing my mom hurt me and Nyah, and he was pissed at all of us after what happened in Scotland.”

A tear glistened in Nyah’s eye, but there was anger in her expression too. “There’s no doubt in my mind that Carlos had Virginia killed.”

“Agreed,” I said.

Lynx and Luca both nodded their agreement.

I mused on it further while Bruno came back into the room with our drinks. “But it really wasn’t enough to just kill her, was it? Lynx was never arrested. Not until much later anyway. The four of us still went on with our lives, we just moved them from this house to the Slayers’ clubhouse.”

Luca cracked his knuckles on the side of the couch. “It’s my fault. I disrespected him. I waged the war so publicly, and you all sided with me, so he had no option but to come after us. He would have appeared weak if he hadn’t.”

Nyah twisted to look at him. “You wouldn’t have had to wage a war in the first place if I hadn’t come here already pregnant with another man’s baby. If we want to place blame, we can point it in my direction.” Her jaw tightened. “Or more accurately, in my father’s. I still can’t believe he just went and sold me to someone.”

The thought of someone selling my child was what kept me awake at night. Not having him here, where I could protect him, made my stomach churn every hour of the day.

How a father could willingly sign over his child, especially one he’d watched grow from a baby, to a little girl, to a woman, was inconceivable to me.

But Nyah’s father’s sins were his own. He’d have to live with the consequences.

I took a bottle of beer from Bruno’s hand and cracked the top on it. “Whose fault it is, is irrelevant. They came after me next. Making it look like I’d disappeared. Then Luca, faking his death. Then Lynx, getting him arrested only to pay off the cops to release him into the Guerras’ custody.”

“And then you, me, and Lynx got a fun little taste of what it was like to be in a cage. Which neither of you deserved, but I sure as fuck did.” Luca took a long swallow of his beer, and then another, his throat bobbing.

The guilt and disgust for himself was written all over his face.

I’d heard all about everything he’d done while we’d been in that basement. There had been literally nothing else to do but talk, and we’d both been so certain we were going to die.

It had been easy to confess every dark sin, every broken promise.

And Luca’s had been plentiful.

And yet I understood them all. Understood the way he’d never forgive himself for the things he’d done in the Guerra name before he’d smartened up, saved his sister, and gotten them both out of there.

He’d been bred for violence. Brainwashed into doing things nobody else would.

And maybe he didn’t deserve forgiveness.

But he did deserve a second chance.

Nyah spoke up. “At that point, he had the three men I loved. With that, if I hadn’t agreed to marry him, he could have used that leverage to make me do anything.”

I agreed with her. “We heard the guards the day of the wedding. Once Nyah was married to him, we were dead. He only kept us alive in case we were needed to force Nyah into the marriage.”

Luca snorted. “That didn’t work out too well for the old man, did it, though?” He put his beer bottle down on the coffee table. “But if all that is true, Enzo had to be involved. He was my father’s right-hand man. He knew everything.”

Nyah stroked her fingers through Lynx’s hair absentmindedly while she considered that. “He seemed genuinely surprised you were alive.”

That didn’t make sense to me either. “I guess maybe he thought we’d all been killed in the church basement?”

Bruno leaned on a wall at the other end of the room and sighed heavily. “Or maybe you have the entire thing wrong, and it wasn’t Carlos and Enzo at all.”

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
I think Dax's brothers would ask a nun about her sex life.

All four of us stared at Bruno like he'd just grown a second head.

Luca twisted on the couch so he was facing his soldier. "Say more. What do you know?"

Bruno shrugged, pushing off the wall to stand straight. "Nothing I could tell you before, when I belonged to your father. But he and Enzo were here, the night Virginia died."

"You're sure?" I asked. "All night?"

He nodded and then focused on Dax. "I liked your mom. She was a good woman. She didn't deserve what happened to her."

I reached across the arms of our couches to squeeze Dax's hand in support.

He nodded at Bruno. "Thank you."

"But when I heard about her death, I checked the security cameras. And Enzo and Carlos were both here that entire night. They didn't leave."

"Can you show us?" I asked him.

He looked at me. "You want to watch eight hours of Carlos and Enzo sleeping?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yes. I do.”

He nodded. “You don’t believe me.”

“Why would I? You were at Carlos’s beck and call the entire time I lived here.”

His gaze met mine. “And now I’m at yours and Luca’s.”

He had a point, but I still wanted to see the footage.

Luca nodded at Bruno. “Get it.”

Bruno left the room, but he returned less than a minute later with a USB stick he plugged into the back of the TV. Luca leaned forward to pick up the remote from the coffee table and hit the power button.

The screen lit up, and after some button pressing from Luca, he managed to get the security camera footage rolling.

Footage from all over the house split the screen, my old bedroom being one of them, Luca’s being another. I stared at Bruno in horror, remembering the things I’d done when I thought I was in private. “Who watches these?”

He shook his head. “No one, unless they have a reason to.”

Luca sniggered at the expression on my face. “You thinking about that night you got naked in my bed, when you thought it was my father’s?”

I scowled at his teasing. “And certain other things I did when I thought I was alone.”

He groaned. “Did they include a vibrator?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know!”

He raised an eyebrow. “I could go look for the footage…apparently.”

I threw a couch cushion at him. “Don’t you dare.”

Bruno folded his arms over his chest. “As you’re about to see, watching security footage is the most boring thing you’ll ever do. Carlos and Enzo never asked us for it, and my brother and I are the only ones who know the login. We were never interested in what any of you were doing in the house. Our focus was only ever on the perimeter. Which is why I know that Virginia left here in the afternoon of the night she was murdered.” He tapped the section of the TV screen showing the front gate.

It was a mostly still image, the only giveaway that it was a video at all was the grand old trees with branches that overhung the gates. Their leaves moved with the gentle breeze that must have been blowing that day.

Bruno rolled his finger toward Luca, indicating he should fast forward the footage.

Luca put his finger down on the button, and the screen sped up. Nothing happened at the front gates until the time stamp read late afternoon. At that point, Virginia walked into the frame, her coat on and her purse tucked beneath her arm.

Dax leaned forward, getting a little closer to the screen, his eyebrows furrowed. “Where’s she going? This had to be after I spoke to her and warned her about what happened in Scotland, surely?”

I nodded. “You definitely called her before this.”

“She promised me she wouldn’t come back here,” he said softly.

“That was probably good advice,” Bruno said. “But as you can see, she did leave in one piece. If you watch another few minutes, you can just see the edge of the bus she gets onto.”

Dax recoiled. “A bus? Why wouldn’t she have just driven her car?”

Bruno shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“What bus was it?” I scooched out from beneath Lynx to try to get a better look at the screen. “I can’t make out any of the details.”

“I’ve no idea. You’d have to ask the bus company, I guess. All I know is Virginia left late that day. At some point during that night, her body was dumped outside the Slayers’ gates. If you want to sit here and watch the rest of the footage, like I did, you’ll see that Enzo and Carlos were here from the time she left, until the next morning.” Bruno looked over at Luca. “No time to murder anyone.”

Luca’s mouth pulled into a grim line. “So maybe we were wrong about them getting their hands dirty, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t order her death. If she came here, confronted them and left, he could have had someone go after her.”

Bruno shook his head. “Me and my brother were not given any such order. I can assure you of that much.” He shifted his gaze to stare down at his feet.

I knew instantly there was more he wasn’t saying, and so did Luca.

“Spit it out, Bruno,” he practically growled. “You say you’re my man now, then prove it. Whatever loyalty you had to my father now belongs to me.”

Bruno lifted his gaze. “I would have known if he’d ordered Virginia’s death. There was nothing about his plans I didn’t know.”

“But…” Luca prompted.

Bruno's expression was unwavering. "He did order yours. I don't know who was to carry it out, not one of us. But he did truly believe you were dead. He grieved you, and his hand in your end." He turned to me. "I know he meant it when he came to you and offered to marry you and take care of the baby. He truly did want a second chance at being a father."

Luca choked out a bitter laugh. "Why am I not even surprised?" He pushed to his feet and paced the room in jerky, angry strides. "He's unbelievable! My own fucking father orders me dead, then tries to just… what? Take my place? Get a do-over with James as his new son?" His fingers clenched into fists. He stared at the ceiling again and closed his eyes, head shaking. "You really are a piece of work, old man. I hope you're rotting in Hell."

I stood and went to him, wrapping my arms around his middle, not at all sure if the affection would be welcome or if he'd shove me away.

But he held me tightly, his strong arms holding my head to his chest. And I held him back just as tight, feeling the sharp rise and fall of his chest even out into something calmer beneath my touch.

Bruno watched us. "I'll give you all some time alone. But, Luca, I really don't think your father killed Virginia. He had a reason to want you dead. What reason would he have for killing her? Your father was many things, but he didn't do things without reason."

"To hurt me?" Luca suggested.

Bruno watched the way Luca clung to me. "If he was trying to hurt you, I think there's other people he could have gone after rather than a housemaid who had been loyal to him for decades."

Those words fell on silence.

Because he was right.

Splitting the four of us apart had hurt us more than anything.

Virginia's death just didn't make sense.

"We need to know where that bus was going." I stepped back so I could see all three of my men. "And why Virginia got on it in the first place."

None of us considered the fact we could just look up the bus routes on the good old internet, in order to work out which one came past

the Guerra mansion. I put it down to the fact we were all tired, hungover, and emotionally strung out. But in the moment, we all stared at each other, and when I suggested that we would have to wait ’til Monday to call them, nobody corrected me.

Dax came up with a plan for us to visit his father, and since the morning sun was already well and truly up, he shot off a text to his dad, asking if they could have a family dinner and discussion.

We all went to bed, slept through the entire day, and it was almost dinner time before the four of us came back together. Dax confirmed his dad had invited us all over for a meal that night and we were due there in thirty minutes.

With a clearer head, I sheepishly suggested we could have just looked up the bus route online, and all three of them blinked at that realization.

Luca screwed up his too-handsome face. “Well, I feel dumb.”

I giggled. “Me too.” I’d done a quick bit of research. “The bus that comes past here at the time stamped on the footage just goes into the main street of Providence, then onto Saint View. Nothing special.”

Dax sighed, his frustration evident in the tight set of his shoulders. “So that’s a dead end. All we know is she was probably killed somewhere around here. Super helpful.”

I squeezed his fingers, knowing his frustration wasn’t just about his mom.

It was about James, and that it felt like we were just killing time, waiting for someone to bring him home to us.

“Is there any news from your guys?” I asked Luca, knowing I didn’t need to explain that I was asking for information on our son.

Luca’s shoulders slumped, and there was so much pain in his expression it hurt to see it.

I just nodded, knowing that look meant there was nothing. Enzo’s trail had gone cold a few days ago, and there’d been no sign of him since.

Lynx fit his hands to the back of my neck and rubbed slow circles on the tense muscles there. “There’s nothing we can do right now. This is why we didn’t want you out there on the road. Because trails go cold all the time. He’ll resurface. He always does. And when that happens, the guys will pick up the search again. He’s probably just lying low because of all the media coverage. We just have to be patient.”

I wanted to wail that I had been patient. That I'd waited. I'd healed my body from the physical wounds it had suffered during birth.

But there was no healing my heart. Not when it just wanted to be out there scouring the streets, even if it was aimless.

Lynx dug his fingers into the tight muscles at the back of my neck. "You're allowed to keep living, even though he's not here with us. You have to, Nyah. Don't let your head tell you you can't."

I wiped my fingers beneath my eyes and forced a smile, aiming it at Dax. "Let's go have dinner with your family. I think I'd really like that right now."

"If you're sure."

I was.

Dax's family home was a sweet, suburban house on the Saint View-Providence border, where the properties were neither upscale mansions nor the run-down government-provided housing that dominated the two towns. The porch light cast a yellow glow over a pretty red painted door, potted plants that had been recently watered decorating the steps.

I walked past them, feeling Virginia's influence on the space.

Dax confirmed it. "My mom loved these plants. Good to see Dad is managing to keep them alive. She'd like that."

He opened the front door without knocking, and I liked how sweetly simple that gesture was.

There were no gates to be buzzed through.

No security on the door.

No endless rooms to wander through, searching for people who may or may not have been home.

"Dad! We're here!"

Stewart stepped out of the kitchen, oven mitts on his hands, and hugged his son. "Excellent! Just in time for pre-dinner drinks."

My stomach, still a little tender from last night's bad choices, grumbled.

"I'm going to stick to mineral water tonight." Dax went to the refrigerator without asking his father's permission like I would have felt inclined to do in my parents' house. He opened it and pulled out a few bottles of water, passing one to me, and two more to Lynx and Luca.

They both shook Stewart's hand. He smiled warmly at them, and then at his son. "It's so nice to have you all here. I'm so glad you wanted to come around."

I kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you so much for having us.”

He waved me off. “Virginia would have had my head for not already having you all here. She was always better at this sort of thing. Making sure we all ate meals together, even after the boys all moved out.”

His voice was so sad it broke my heart. He’d lost so much in recent months. A wife. A grandson. Any future he might have planned that involved either one.

I gave him the most genuine smile I had. “We’re here now. I think she’d like that.”

He nodded and turned away, busying himself with the casserole he had bubbling away in the oven. “She very much would.” He set the dish on the stove top and lifted the lid, the aroma scenting the air so deliciously my mouth watered.

He turned back to us, a little more composed, and just in time for the front door to open and King and Roarke to come barreling through it, joking with each other at the top of their lungs. They stopped mid conversation when they saw the rest of us gathered in the kitchen, and both of them did the rounds of hugs, for me, handshakes—for Lynx and Luca—and playful shoves for their older brother.

Unlike the four of us who had opted for drinks easy on the stomach, both King and Roarke took beers from the fridge and settled into seats at the kitchen table.

I tried to help with the food preparation, but Stewart waved me out of the cooking area and over to the table.

Dax shook his head, pulling out a seat for me to sit on. “Let him go. It’s what Mom used to do. None of us were ever allowed to help make dinner once we moved out. It was her way of showing us she loved us.”

I glanced over Dax’s shoulder at the man he looked so much like. Stewart still had an edge of sadness about him, but he moved around the kitchen, making sure everything was just right, and I saw the pleasure in his eyes over doing it.

“Don’t worry,” he called, clearly overhearing our conversation. “I’ll accept all the help with cleaning up after we eat.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I told him.

He winked at me. The entire vibe in the kitchen, which was really too small for all of us, was exactly how I would have pictured Dax growing up with parents like Stewart and Virginia.

Dax pointed the top of his water bottle at me. “What are you quietly smiling about?”

I raised one shoulder. “I don’t know. This house just feels like you.”

“In that it’s brick, like his head?” Roarke asked.

Dax gave him the middle finger.

“Hey! None of that at the dinner table. Your mother would have a fit.” Stewart threw a tea towel at his eldest son, but it was good-natured.

King leaned his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together, and prayed up to the ceiling. “Then forgive me, Mother, because I’m about to defile your kitchen table with something way more inappropriate.”

His brothers and father all groaned. Lynx, Luca, and I just waited.

King, clearly enjoying the suspense, drew out the moment for long seconds before he eventually indicated between the four of us. “I want the details on what’s going on with all of you. I mean, we were at the naming ceremony. And we’ve picked up some things here and there at the shop—”

Roarke snorted on a laugh. “What my twin here is so elegantly trying to say is, are the four of you a couple now, or what?”

Dax raised an eyebrow, but I did notice he had to take a sip of his drink to cover his surprise. He managed to get out, “Well, couple means two, little brother. So we are definitely not that.”

King leaned in. “How does it work though? Are you with all of them, Nyah? Are you three together too?” He gestured between Dax, Lynx, and Luca.

Roarke leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. “I just want to know whose name you put as your emergency contact if you’re in a foursome. Like, there’s only space on those forms for one name… How do you choose?”

Stewart shook his head. “First dinner after your mother dies and we’re talking about foursomes over the casserole.” He smiled at me. “This is what happens when you have three boys though. Be grateful you only have James. Make sure he gets a little sister next, yes?”

My bottom lip wobbled a bit at the casual mention of my son’s name, but it was happy tears that pricked the backs of my eyes.

Happy because Stewart bringing up his grandson’s name so easily, and speaking of a future he was a part of, made me really just want to hug the man.

I didn’t even mind the overly personal questions from Dax’s brothers.

Because all of this felt like what family was supposed to be. I'd never had any of it before, and Luca and Lynx also seemed flummoxed.

But Dax, King, and Roarke were all so comfortable in each other's presence that it was impossible not to feel the connection between them.

Dax waved his brothers questions off. "We're not answering any of that. Mind your own business or go find your own foursome to work it out with."

King considered that for a moment, then he grinned. "Mine would definitely be made up of three women though." He looked over at Lynx and Luca. "You guys are cute and whatever. But I like the pu—"

Dax casually squirted a stream of water in his face.

I laughed at King spluttering and claiming the tea towel that had been tossed at Dax earlier. King wiped the water off his face and complained about it being up his nose, but he stopped talking about his personal sexual preferences that nobody had asked for.

Stewart called us all to come grab bowls of the casserole he'd made, and he set a big basket of crusty bread in the middle. We sat back down with our dinner, and all the guys went quiet while they wolfed down fast mouthfuls of the delicious food.

Virginia should have been here. It made me so angry she wasn't.

I didn't have her. I didn't have my son. And while I couldn't do anything about either of those things, I could find out who had started all of this. Lynx was right when he'd said this had all started with Virginia's murder.

The fact the police had never solved it needed to be rectified.

"Stewart, the day she died…was there anything wrong with Virginia's car?"

He chewed on his food as he thought. He swallowed. "Not that I know of. Why?"

Luca took over. "We watched some of the security footage from that day. We could see her leave my dad's place and get on the bus."

His dad did a double take. "The bus? Why on earth would she be getting on the bus?"

Lynx broke a piece of bread in half and dipped it into the rich casserole liquid. "That's why we're wondering about her car. Maybe it wouldn't start?"

"No. It was fine. Someone delivered it back to me the day after her body was found." Stewart looked at Luca. "One of your father's men, I

believe. He handed me the keys and said he was so sorry, and that he would miss Virginia."

"Probably Bruno." Luca's shoulders dropped as he breathed out. "You can't think of any reason she would have gotten on a bus going into town?"

Dax's dad shook his head slowly. "The only place she ever took the bus was into the city. She hated driving in the traffic or really driving anywhere she wasn't familiar with. That story Dax told about that trip we took to Virginia reminded me of that. I drove the entire time because she wouldn't. She wasn't delicate over much, but she was a bit of a passenger princess."

I was grateful to know any little detail of Dax's mom. "You made her feel safe."

He smiled at that. "I hope so. In more ways than just driving her around."

Lynx made a noise around his mouthful of food, and we all looked over at him expectantly.

He held up one finger while he frantically chewed his food and pulled his phone out of his back pocket with his other hand. Once he'd swallowed, he glanced apologetically at Stewart. "Forgive me for having my phone out at the dinner table. But if Virginia only ever took the bus into the city, maybe that's where she was actually going?" He stabbed his phone a few times and then grinned, twisting it around to show the rest of us, even though the writing was too small to be seen across the table. "That bus ended at the Saint View bus depot. Then changed routes to head into the city. She wouldn't have even had to get up off her seat."

"That was late in the afternoon though," I mused. "Pretty late to be heading into the city unless you were planning to stay the night. That could be why she left her car at the Guerras' place instead of driving herself to the bus depot. We all know if you leave a car at the depot overnight in Saint View, it probably won't be there when you get back."

The depot was in the worst part of town, well known for the undesirables who lurked around there after dark. Virginia's car wasn't Guerra-level fancy, but it was nice enough for the scumbags to want to steal or strip for parts, or at the very least, vandalize for fun.

A little kernel of excitement lit up inside me at the feeling we'd just had a mini breakthrough in tracking down her killer. And now that I had a taste of how that felt, I wanted more. I leaned forward eagerly. "Okay, so if she was going to the city that night, why?"

“Aunt Carole lives there,” King offered. “She always took the bus in to see her and she definitely would have planned to stay the night if that was the case because the two of them together always equaled several empty bottles of wine.”

Stewart squinted at that and rubbed his forehead. “She would have told me if she was going to see her sister. Why wouldn’t she?”

He had a point.

“She didn’t tell you where she was going at all?” I questioned.

“No. I didn’t even know she’d been at the Guerras’ until just now either, though I guess I should have assumed, since they brought the car back. I was just so thick in the grief I never really thought about it.” There was hurt in his expression. “She never said much about working there. We all know why. That’s how she kept us safe. By making sure we never knew anything about the things she saw in that house.”

Dax drummed his tattooed fingers over the table absentmindedly. “But normally she would have at least told you she was going to work, wouldn’t she? I remember her kissing my head every morning before school and her saying she was off to work.”

Stewart nodded. “Of course.”

“But she didn’t that morning?” I asked.

“No, she didn’t.”

“Maybe because I’d asked her not to go,” Dax said. “And maybe that’s why she didn’t tell anyone she was going into the city either. Because she knew she was doing something dangerous and that we’d try to stop her.”

Silence settled on all of us.

Dax’s expression grew pained as he tried to work it all out in his head. “Aunt Carole’s place isn’t dangerous. She wasn’t going there. What the hell is in the city that could have been dangerous to her?”

The guys threw around some very halfhearted suggestions, none of it making any sense.

But a sick feeling started in the pit of my stomach and only grew with every second that passed.

Because suddenly, I was sure I knew exactly where she’d been going. “My parents’ place.” I swallowed the bile rising in my throat. “I’d bet a million dollars she was going to talk to my parents.”

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LUCA

Dear Diary,
Remind me never to solve crimes over casserole again.

I stared at Nyah. “Why the hell would she want to talk to your parents?”

A tear dripped down her face. “Dax had called her and told her how everything had blown up in Scotland. About you claiming the baby as yours. About the war between you and your dad and how Dax was involved. He’d warned her to stay away from your father because it wasn’t safe.”

“But she went anyway.” Dax stared down at his half-eaten food.

Nyah nodded. “Yes. And there’s only one reason I can think of why she would have willingly walked back into that mess after you’d told her how dangerous it was.”

Dax looked up at Nyah with heartbroken eyes. “For us. And for the baby. She would have always put us ahead of herself.”

I swallowed thickly. “She’d worked for my father for decades. If anyone had a shot at convincing him of something, it would have been her.”

Nyah grimaced. “She knew everything. She knew Dax is James’s biological father. But that Dax would never get to be that if I was forced to

marry Carlos…”

I groaned. “So she went to him and begged him to call off the wedding. But she had no real argument with him because she couldn’t just come out and say Dax was the baby’s biological father. That would have painted a huge target on Dax’s back and could have endangered Nyah too. So he would have just told her to go away.”

Nyah’s fingers trembled. “But my parents knew the truth. So she went to them, to try to plead with them instead.” She laughed bitterly. “Which might have worked with any reasonable set of parents. They would have heard what happened in Scotland and said, ‘You know what, Nyah? This was all a big mistake and you really should come home, all arranged marriages are cancelled.’” She slumped lower in her seat. “But my father isn’t normal. He would have told her to go away too.”

I stared at her. “Or he didn’t give her the opportunity. Because if she confronted him with the truth, and he realized that someone other than you, him, and your mom knew about the baby’s true paternity…”

She stared at me in horror.

And then at Dax. She shook her head hard and fast, tiny shakes of disbelief. “No. No. He couldn’t have.”

King, Roarke, and Stewart had all gone deathly silent.

Dax was pale.

Nyah grabbed his hand, her tears spilling over her cheeks and turning into sobs. “Is he right? Did my father kill your mother?”

Dax said nothing. He just sat there, looking stunned.

I didn’t want to be the bad guy. Fucking hell, I’d had a lifetime of being the one who said the hard thing, the hurtful thing, but I knew in my gut I had to keep going. Had to keep laying it all on the table so the pieces started would fit together.

Virginia deserved that.

Even if it made them hate me.

“Jeremiah killed Virginia that night when she went to his house because he realized she knew about who the baby’s real father was.”

“Why frame Lynx though?” Dax asked, finally taking a breath and turning in my direction. “Why carve up her back and dump her in front of the Slayers’ gates? I’m sure she wasn’t the first person he’d ever killed. He’s Mafia. He’d have ways of disposing of bodies.”

It was a good question. One I wasn’t sure I had an answer for.

But Lynx did. “Because I knew too. I knew the baby wasn’t Luca’s. If Virginia told him that…then maybe I was a target too. I was knocked out that night, but maybe it was an attempt to kill me? I was in a public place, so maybe they were interrupted and never got to finish the job? But why bother when they can just frame me for murder? I’d be out of the picture if I was dead or locked up. Either way, it wouldn’t matter.”

Nyah was almost green as she forced words out. “That didn’t work, so then he started coming for you all one by one. First Dax. Then Luca. And then eventually, it all came full circle and Lynx was arrested.” She stared at me. “Bruno said your father wanted you dead. What if my father agreed to do it for him?” She shoved her chair back, the feet scraping along the tiled floor with a screech. “Oh my God, is there no ends to which that man will go to suck up your father’s ass? He did, didn’t he? He promised to kill Luca. And he tried to have Dax and Lynx removed because you were all the people who knew about the baby’s true paternity. Fuck! I even told him who knew about the baby that day he came to the Slayers’ clubhouse. He wanted a family link to the Guerras so bad he tried to have all three of you taken out. Hell, he’s probably behind the bomb from the other night, isn’t he? He doesn’t even need me alive anymore, does he? Just the baby.” She stared at us in horror. “Does he have my child?”

I had no idea.

There were some parts that weren’t quite fitting together. Like how Jeremiah knew Lynx was the Lynx Killer. I was pretty sure Dax hadn’t told his mom when he’d called and warned her about what had happened in Scotland and begged her to stay away from my father.

But I couldn’t say any of that in front of Dax’s dad and brothers.

And it didn’t matter anyway.

Because Jeremiah knew something.

And I was sure as hell going to find out what.

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LUCA

Dear Diary,
I finally kept a promise I'd been carrying for months

It wasn't hard to get Nyah's father to come to me. All it took was a single phone call, a mention of cigars and whiskey, and Jeremiah Matish practically fell over his own feet.

Within twenty-four hours, I opened the door on his hopeful face and fought the urge to ram my fist into it.

Instead, I clenched my fingers around the door handle and smiled as graciously as I had in me.

If he noticed how fake and forced it was, he didn't say anything.

He did clap me on the shoulder as he walked past me though, and thanked me for the invitation.

"My pleasure. It's overdue." I pointed to Bruno. "Forgive me. I'm going to need you to surrender any weapons you might have brought. They'll be returned to you at the end, but it's never a good idea to have too many armed men in one room at one time." I flashed him the insides of my jacket and turned around, holding it up at the back to show him there was nothing in my waistband either.

He paused for a moment, then nodded, pulling out a gun from a holster beneath his jacket and surrendering it to Bruno. “We are family now, after all. You being my grandson’s father and all. I’ve been waiting for this invitation for quite a while.”

Yeah, well, I was too busy being fake dead and avoiding your car bombs and searching for my son, you piece of fucking shit.

I was tempted to say the thought out loud but resisted it, letting the silence hang instead. This man was no family of mine, even if his blood did run in Nyah’s and James’s veins.

Jeremiah gazed around the grand foyer, a blush rising up his cheeks. I just stood there staring at him.

He tugged at the collar of his dress shirt. “So…is this get-together taking place here in the foyer, or…”

This time, my smile was real. “Oh no. I invited some others. I hope you don’t mind it won’t just be the two of us?”

He shook his head quickly and laughed, clearly relieved he wasn’t going to be alone with me. Or maybe even a tad pleased.

I smiled at him. “Are you happy with the outcome of arranging Nyah’s marriage?”

He looked at me sharply. “She was never supposed to marry Enzo. Not while…”

I cocked my head to one side. “Not while me or my father were alive?”

He agreed quickly. “She took sacred vows with Enzo. Vows that should be respected at all costs, but he forced them on her. Gave her no choice. But I know she’s with you now, and Constance and I are very pleased.”

All his talk about Nyah having choices pissed me off, because he’d been the first to take them away from her. “And yet, you haven’t even asked about her once since you got here.”

He stared at me.

I wanted to gouge his eyes out.

But I smiled again, like him asking after his only daughter’s welfare wasn’t a big deal. “Let’s go and get you a cigar and a drink. Everyone else is waiting.”

He followed me eagerly down the hallway. “Who else did you invite? Has your uncle returned? I heard MacGregor was in town too.”

I ignored his questions, bypassed the gym, and opened the door that led down to the basement. A rush of cold, damp air hit us both square in the

face, and I didn’t miss the way Matish recoiled at the vaguely unpleasant smell. The stairwell was lit by a single, dull yellow bulb.

I motioned for him to go ahead of me. “We keep the good stuff down here.” I clapped him on the shoulder in the same patronizing way he’d done to me. “Only the best for my son’s grandfather. Can’t have you drinking or smoking the cheap stuff.”

Jeremiah relaxed visibly and grinned at me. “That’s what I like to hear.”

He walked down the narrow staircase, and I pulled the door shut behind me.

He didn’t notice me slip a padlock on the door and lock it.

He got to the bottom and stopped.

Then spun on his heel. “What is this?”

I peered at him through the dim light that reflected off the grimy walls and cast deep shadows around the room. “What does it look like, Matish? Haven’t you ever heard about Carlos Guerra’s cages? The cells he keeps his trafficked women in?”

“You said we were coming down here for a drink. I assumed this was a wine cellar.”

I walked around him in a slow circle, eyeing the older man. “I’m more of a whiskey man myself.”

“Whiskey could be kept in a cellar too,” Matish practically whispered.

I snorted at the panic creeping into his expression. “Could be, but my father was really more into keeping his prisoners in the dark. The alcohol is all upstairs on display. He always did have more respect for those bottles than he did for human life. But you knew that, right, Matish? You knew that when you sold him your daughter?”

Matish shook his head, but we both knew he was lying.

He doubled down on it anyway. “No. I didn’t know.”

I raised an eyebrow and my voice at the same time. “You hear that, Nyah? He says he didn’t know he was selling you to a man who liked to keep women in cages.”

Nyah emerged from the shadows at the back of the room, so stunningly beautiful dressed in all black that hugged the new curves she’d gotten from pregnancy. Her tits were full, her hips rounded with some extra padding she hadn’t had when I first met her.

She looked Catwoman-esque, in leggings and a tight long-sleeved top, but it was the expression on her pretty face that really gave me a hard-on.

The pure venom and fire and determination in her eyes when she stared at her father, the man who'd started all of this.

Behind her, Lynx and Dax stepped forward, the three of us forming a wall of protection around Nyah, all four of us facing off against the man who'd given her life.

Jeremiah backed up a step as we advanced, and then another. "Nyah? What is this? What's going on?"

We pressed forward, herding him like the dumb animal he was.

His foot crossed the line of the cage, the one Nyah had been held in, the one that still bore the traces of her blood from when she'd birthed her baby down here.

She made a show of kicking the cage door shut.

It clanged so loudly the sound echoed off the walls.

Matish cringed at the noise but made no move to try to escape.

Smart man. He knew we had him surrounded.

"Nyah," he said softly, but in the same tone he always used with her that he never used with me. The tone that told her he was better than her, stronger, and in control. "What is this?"

Nyah was having none of it today. She glared at him and pulled a gun from the waistband of her pants, casually trailing it over the metal bars of the cage she'd locked her father in. "The guys and I thought it was about time you and I had a chat."

Her father narrowed his eyes at her, his temper seeping through the cool, calm, Mafia don exterior he laid on thick with everyone else. "We could have done that in the civilization of the living room."

She shrugged. "Could have. But I thought you might like to see what it felt like to be locked up and held against your will."

"Why would I want to know that?"

She stopped her pacing and stared at him. "You know he locked me in here, right? Carlos, I mean. The man you thought was such a good match for me."

Matish folded his arms across his chest and repeated his earlier mantra. "I didn't know."

"Bullshit," Nyah spat back, tongue quick as a serpent. "You knew, and you didn't care, so long as it got you in with the almighty Guerra family. You sold me off like I was property." She shrugged. "But I'm stronger than

that. Question is, are you? It's your turn now to be alone and scared, held down here by someone with more power than you."

Matish turned to me.

Stupid, stupid man.

Nyah smacked her gun on the metal bar, just an inch from her father's face. "That's me, Dad! Not him. He knows it, why don't you?" She shook her head in disgust at him. "Hell, maybe I should thank you. For tearing me away from Dax. For taking him. For faking Luca's death, and getting Lynx arrested. You left me all alone in the hopes I'd break and go running back to Carlos. And boy, I got so close, didn't I? Maybe I should thank Enzo too, for saving me from that fate. But I'm still here, and now I'm the one holding the gun." She laughed bitterly. "I could almost forgive you for all of it. I could forgive you for hurting me." Her eyes were so sharp they were like spears. "But you took my son, and you killed his grandmother. And for that, I'll never ever forgive you."

Jeremiah did a double take. "What? I didn't have anything to do with the baby or Virginia—"

"Stop fucking lying! I don't believe for a second you and Enzo aren't in bed together."

He shook his head. "Nyah, we aren't. I was just as surprised as you were by everything that happened at that wedding."

She paused. Stared at him.

Indecision that hadn't been there a second before suddenly flickered all over her face.

Matish saw it, clear as day, and had no problem doubling down. "Your mother and I have prayed every night for the safe return of our grandson."

I wanted to vomit in my mouth. "For fuck's sake, the lies just roll off your tongue as easily as they rolled off my father's. Are you all the same? You. Enzo. MacGregor, but fuck, at least he has an accent. You're all just pathetic, Carlos clones, aren't you?"

Matish stared at me. "And what does that make you?"

I grabbed the bars, squeezing them tight, glaring through them at Nyah's father on the other side. "Oh, I know what I am, Matish. I know I'm a piece of shit. That's exactly what makes us different. Because you're still trying to pretend you're not."

Nyah's voice cut through the cold air. "I'm so fucking sick of this! Just admit what you did," she shouted. "Take some responsibility for the fact

I’m standing here in front of you, your own flesh and blood, without my child in my arms.”

I saw the little girl in her. The one inside the woman who was so desperately trying to be strong. And I wanted this for her. Wanted her to have the full power she deserved.

But Matish was never going to give it to her.

He stared at her, dead in the eye. “I did those things. Stole you. Took your men from you and kept them in the church basement. Made deals behind your back to get what I wanted. But I didn’t kill Virginia, and I don’t know where your baby is.”

Her fingers trembled.

She needed my reassurance.

So I gave it to her. “Kill him.”

She glanced at me sharply. “What if he’s telling the truth?”

Matish reached for her, his panic escaping again. “I am, Nyah! I swear it!”

I shook my head, seething on the inside over everything this man was. He’d kept me from her. He’d kept me and Dax and Lynx locked in a fucking church basement, waiting for the right time to execute us.

I would lose no sleep over doing the same for him.

Nyah squeezed her eyes shut.

“Nyah, you aren’t a killer,” her father pleaded. “You aren’t like him. Just let me go. I didn’t do this.”

“Liar,” I spat in his direction.

“I’m not.”

Nyah looked at me miserably then turned to her father again. “If it wasn’t you, then who?”

But I’d had enough. I’d made Nyah a promise that night we’d stood outside the Slayers’ clubhouse.

She’d promised to kill my father.

And I’d promised to kill hers.

Because when it came down to it, when it came down to pointing a gun at the forehead of the man you’d called Daddy your entire life, I’d known neither of us would have been capable of it.

I didn’t need her to kill my father.

But she needed me to kill hers.

I took the gun from her so easily it was like she had offered it to me on a silver platter.

And put a bullet through Jeremiah Matish’s brain without so much as a second thought.

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
I broke Luca's heart with one question.

The gunshot cracked painfully right beside my ear, the noise so loud an instant ringing drowned out everything else.

I flinched, chaos surrounding me, and yet something deep in my mind processed the bullet wound appearing on my father's Botoxed forehead. Blood dripping, his eyes turning from focused and sharp to unseeing in an instant.

His body fell forward at an alarming rate of speed, gravity taking over, his knees hitting the cold concrete, his body slumping forward to hit the bars. He landed face down on the floor, blood pooling almost instantly beneath him from the gaping head wound Luca had given him.

I stared, unable to comprehend it all enough to speak.

He'd been saying words just a second ago, begging me for his life, promising me he hadn't done it.

And now he was dead.

I stared at Luca.

Dax pushed me behind him, putting himself between me and Luca, still holding the gun.

Dax shoved him in the chest. “What did you do?! Why didn’t you let him speak? He was going to tell us what he knew about my mother’s killer!”

He knelt to the floor, flipping my father over enough for us to know once and for all that the man was dead, and there was no bringing him back to answer our questions.

Dax backed off from the dead body, shaking his head in disgust and anger, but all of it directed at Luca. “Was it you? Who killed my mother? You knew about the Lynx Killer. You were there that night when her body was found at the clubhouse.”

I stared at Dax in shock. “Dax!”

But Dax wasn’t done. He whirled on me. “Your father was just about to tell us who it was! Is it a coincidence Luca stepped in and made sure he couldn’t? That was supposed to be your kill, Nyah! That’s what we agreed, that you would get to be the one who pulled the trigger!”

He was right, it was what we’d agreed as we’d planned this attack. But I couldn’t hear his accusations about Luca. I didn’t want to believe any of that.

And yet it made sense.

Luca had taken the gun right out of my hand and used it to silence my father once and for all.

I shook my head at Luca. “What if he was telling the truth? What if it wasn’t him and you just killed an innocent man?”

Luca’s eyes widened. He looked between me and Dax, his shock all over his face. “Are you two serious right now?” He glared at me. “Innocent, princess? Is that what you’re trying to call him?” He curled his lip and reached for me, faster than anyone could stop him. He grabbed my shirt, ripping it up, exposing this scar on my chest where I’d been branded with the Guerra name. “This is who your father is, Nyah! He’s why you have these scars on your skin!” He moved in closer, so I was sandwiched between him and Lynx.

But all I saw was Luca.

And the pure agony on his face when he whispered, “I fucking love you. I would never do anything to hurt you, Lynx, or Dax. I thought you knew that.”

I instantly knew he was right. That even if my father had been telling the truth about Virginia, that he was guilty of many, many other sins.

That he deserved to die.

But Luca wasn’t done, his hurt came through in his voice, loud and clear. “I made you a promise, back at the Slayers’ clubhouse. I promised I’d kill him so you didn’t have to. Because no one should have to kill their own flesh and blood.” Anger took the place of the hurt in his expression. He turned to Dax. “I loved your mother, and you fucking know that. If I was a bigger man, maybe I’d give you a pass because you’re grieving.” He breathed out a long sigh. “But I’m not the bigger man. Not tonight.”

Dax and I both tried to talk at once, but Luca held up his hand, his exhaustion clear.

“I don’t want to hear it. Frankly, you can both go to hell.”

And when he walked away, I couldn’t blame him.

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DAX

Dear Diary,
I was just trying to apologize. But things escalated.

I flinched as Luca slammed the door at the top of the basement stairs.

I closed my eyes and screwed up my face. “Fuck.”

I didn’t want to see anything. I was well aware of exactly how badly I’d just fucked up. But opening my eyes and having it confirmed in Lynx’s eyes was like being punched in the gut.

He didn’t say anything. But he didn’t need to.

“I’ll clean up this mess.” He squatted on the floor and grimaced at the dead body that needed dealing with.

I swallowed thickly, and with no idea what else to say or do, I offered my help.

Lynx's eyes found mine. “I think you’ve got something else you need to do first.” They slid to Nyah. “You too.”

Nyah scrubbed her hands over her face. “Don’t look at me like that, Lynx,” she moaned. “Even though I deserve it.”

We both deserved the quiet judgment Lynx was handing out.

He shrugged. “No judgment. But you might as well have kicked the guy in the nuts. You know he didn’t kill Virginia. And you know your father

deserved that bullet. He did you a favor, and you threw it back in his face with a distrust I thought we were over."

We were.

Luca and I had been locked in that fucking church basement for so long, only each other for company. We'd grown close. Closer than I'd ever been with any grown man. I'd told him things I'd never even told my dad or my brothers.

I just wanted to know who to blame for my mother's death. I just wanted to blame someone other than myself.

And I'd fucked up and taken it out on someone who really didn't deserve it.

I stared at the ceiling, hoping Luca was up there somewhere and not storming out the door, never to be seen again.

My heart throbbed at that idea. That he might leave and never come back.

I instantly knew I couldn't handle another person walking out of my life. It had nearly killed me when I'd lost Nyah. Losing my mother and son had been yet another stab.

I couldn't lose the man who'd become a brother to me.

No, more than that.

A partner. A friend. A confidant.

Guilt ate away at me for the accusations I'd made. For the fact I'd held them inside me, unspoken all this time, only for them to come out at the worst moment.

Nyah moved toward the door. "I need to go find him."

I caught her hand. "Let me go first. I…I owe him a bigger apology than you do."

She stared up at me and then eventually nodded. "Okay."

I could tell it hurt her to say it. Could tell she so desperately wanted to go find him and make her own amends. But she pushed up on her toes and brushed her lips over mine.

"He'll forgive you."

I wasn't so sure. And suddenly, I was fucking terrified I'd just screwed this whole thing up. That he would leave, and Nyah, Lynx, and I would try to go on without him.

But I knew in my heart we couldn't. That this relationship only worked with the four of us here together. Each of us bringing something different.

Each of us compensating for the others' flaws with our strengths. The four of us a family I didn't want to lose.

I pounded up the rickety basement stairs, bursting out into the mansion with its polished floors and perfectly dusted side tables. For half a second, I wondered who was doing that now my mother was gone.

But I pushed the thought away, realizing it didn't matter. There was always going to be things that reminded me of what I'd lost.

But I wanted to be here for the people I still had.

Luca had become one of my people. And I hated myself for hurting him.

I checked the gym and the kitchen, but he wasn't there. Bruno and Viktor hovered by the doorway in the foyer, and I stopped in front of them. "Did he leave?"

Bruno shook his head and inclined it toward the grand staircase that led to the second floor. I gave him a nod of thanks and took the stairs two at a time until I got to the upstairs landing. Instinct led me to his bedroom, but when I got there, I frowned at the empty room. There were plenty of other bedrooms and a theatre up on this level, but I'd really thought he'd be here.

A breeze blew in from the balcony door I hadn't even realized was open. It was dark outside, nothing but the moon and the neighborhood streets out beyond the trees that provided privacy for the house.

A shadowed figure stood out there, staring over it all.

I let myself out, closing the door behind me.

Luca glanced over his shoulder, saw it was me, then instantly turned back around, his words clipped. "Be careful on the railing there. Some bolts are missing, and it's wobbling. I need to get Bruno to call someone in."

He wouldn't look at me. He was clearly so mad, but still cared about my safety. That was something.

"Luc," I practically whispered.

"Don't fucking call me that. I hate being called that."

Except he didn't. He'd never corrected me before, and I'd been calling him that ever since the church basement.

"I'll call you whatever you want, as long as you let me apologize."

He breathed out slowly, his elbows leaning on the balcony railing. "Why bother? Words are meaningless."

"They aren't. I tattoo words onto people every day. Words that mean something to them."

He snorted on his derision. "You tattoo I love Mom and RIP Grandad."

The corner of my mouth flickered up a little because that was true. “But I tattoo the names of people who are important. I tattooed James’s name on your skin because it meant something to you.”

Luca swallowed hard, shadows flickering across his profile.

I sighed heavily. “Listen. I’m really fucking sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I did. I know you had nothing to do with my mom’s murder.”

His words were clipped and angry. “I might not have been her son, but I cared about her too. You don’t get the monopoly on grief over her death.”

“I know. I also know you think words are cheap.”

“People lie to me every day, Dax. I lie. Everyone fucking lies.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “So tell me what makes this better. Tell me how I go back to being allowed to call you Luc.” I swallowed hard. “Because I don’t want to go back to calling you Luca.”

He twisted to look at me in the darkness and threw his hands up in frustration. “I don’t know, Dax! Suck my dick. What do you want me to say?”

I blinked.

His words were crass. Designed to push me away, and hell, maybe that would have worked on someone else. Someone who didn’t know him the way I did. Someone who didn’t see the sharp, harsh words came from a place of hurt and betrayal.

That I’d caused.

We stared at each other, his dark eyes black in the night, locked on mine.

His hurt right there in his face, unmasked, walls down, just him being honest and letting me know I’d fucking hurt him.

And that tore me up inside, in the same way it would have if it had been Nyah standing there in front of me.

I took a step closer.

And then another.

Dragged in by a force I didn’t quite understand, but one that came from a feeling deep inside me, one that whispered I cared about Luca in a way that was more than I’d thought.

He took a step back. “What the fuck was that?”

“What?” I asked softly.

He pointed at my face. “All of whatever that was.”

It would have been so easy to lie. To do exactly what he'd said everybody did.

But I couldn't. "That was me considering it."

His eyes widened. "Considering what? Sucking my dick?" He took another step back, avoiding the broken railing in favor of one that wasn't loose. "I was fucking joking, Dax. You're as straight as they come."

"Then why am I standing here, thinking about getting on my knees for you?"

He blew out a long breath of air and tilted his head up to the night sky. "Stop. I don't need you to suck my dick to forgive you. I'm an asshole, but I'm not that much of an asshole. Just leave me alone. I'll be over it in a few days and we'll go back to normal."

But I was suddenly sure that wasn't what I wanted. The accusations about my mom had come out of nowhere, thoughts I hadn't been actively aware of.

But now that I was, I also realized there was more bubbling away beneath the surface.

There was an attraction to Luca that scared me, that changed things, so I'd hidden it deep where I didn't have to consider what it meant. Not just for him and me, but for Lynx and Nyah too.

"I don't want to go back to normal," I whispered.

His ass hit the edge of the railing, and I stepped in, so we were eye to eye, nowhere for him to go but to face me and tell me he didn't want this.

He groaned, his gaze flickering all over my face. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I reached for the buckle on his belt. "I don't know."

I pulled his belt from the loops on his pants and dropped it at our feet. Undid the button and lowered the zipper on his fly.

There was a bulge behind his black underwear. He leaned back, both hands on the railing. "What now, Dax? You got me hard. Good for you. You ready to walk away yet?"

"No," I said honestly.

Luca rolled his eyes and shoved me away. "Don't be a dickhead. You aren't going to suck my cock. You think I haven't been here a dozen times with guys who think they want it, only to realize no, they actually are fucking straight? That's you all over."

He tried to move away again.

I caught his arm, hauling him back. “Then you don’t fucking know me at all.”

I pressed my lips against his.

He froze.

I didn’t.

I kissed him because it felt right. It felt like a friendship that had somewhere along the line turned into something more, and neither of us had even seen it coming.

Maybe he wasn’t ready for it.

But I was suddenly sure I was. I didn’t want to just watch him while he fucked Lynx or Nyah. I wanted more.

He smelled like him. Not the dirt and blood and grime that so often covered him. But the scent that was just uniquely his. The one I’d fallen asleep next to every night in that church while we’d huddled together for warmth, not even sure we were going to make it out alive.

He shook his head and shoved me away. “Stop fucking playing with me.”

I pushed my hand down the front of his underwear. “No.”

He groaned, leaning his forehead to mine, our breaths mingling while I stroked him. Having someone else’s cock in my hand was a new experience, but his breath changed, becoming shorter and sharper, and his lips instinctively sought mine.

This time, he kissed me back. I moaned into his mouth, his tongue pressing against mine, the two of us falling into a kiss that should have felt wrong but just didn’t. I grabbed the back of his head with my free hand, jerking him harder and faster while I kissed him, something deep inside me settling at touching him like this. Like it had been an unspoken question between us, one I hadn’t even been aware of until I’d really gotten to know him and realized there was so much of him to like when he wasn’t being Luca the Mafia Killer.

He thrust his hips toward my hand, and my dick got hard at touching him like this. He panted on my lips, precum beading on the head of his cock.

I wanted to taste him. Wanted to get on my knees and see what it felt like to have his cock in my mouth.

But I couldn’t stop kissing him. And he held me just as tightly as I held him, like his body was realizing at the same time I was that maybe there

could be more than just a friendship between us.

It didn't replace the way I felt about Nyah.

It only made me want her more. Want her in the middle of this.

"Fuck," Luca groaned. "I need to come."

All I knew about getting guys off was what I liked. So I pumped his shaft while I kissed him then reached between his legs to squeeze his balls.

He groaned, leaning heavily on me, his mouth landing somewhere between my shoulder and my neck. He buried his face there, his hips jerking as he ground himself into my hand, his hot, thick, white cum spilling over my fingers while he moaned out his release.

He breathed there for a minute, his chest rising and falling, neither of us moving, my hand still wrapped around his dick, a mess covering my fingers.

Eventually, his breaths slowed, and he leaned back on the good part of the railing, creating a little space between us.

He grinned at me, that arrogant smile he was well known for. "Your first hand job?"

"First one I've given to someone else."

He laughed. "Did it scratch the itch? You ready to go back to pussy now?"

I was. Because I'd wanted Nyah from the moment I'd met her and I always would. Nothing could ever change that.

But that didn't mean I didn't like what he and I had done here.

He dragged up his pants and tucked his dick back inside them.

I leaned in and kissed him again.

He pulled back in surprise, his eyes searching mine. "You don't owe me anything, Dax. Your apology is accepted."

I shook my head. "None of that was an apology. It was only because I wanted to."

His eyes searched mine. "What else do you want? Because you're looking at me like you're disappointed you didn't get to do more."

I nodded toward the bedroom, where Lynx and Nyah sat, the two of them watching us. "I do."

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NYAH

TEN MINUTES EARLIER

Dear Diary,
Balcony sex is one way to celebrate overthrowing the patriarchy.

I washed blood off my hands in the gym bathroom until the water ran clear again. At some point during the process, I realized I was literally washing my father's blood down the drain, and that maybe, some part of me should have felt bad about that.

But all I could think about was Luca, and the things Dax and I had said, and how bad I felt about all of it.

"He's not going to hate you, Nyah." Lynx wiped off his hands.

We both traipsed out of the gym and through the foyer, Lynx stopping where Bruno and Viktor stood, the three of them speaking in hushed tones, no doubt about the dead body of my father lying in the basement, waiting for removal.

I was sure I was in shock. I had to be, because I didn't feel anything. No sadness or remorse for what we'd done.

The only regret I had was over Luca.

I was grateful when Lynx put his arm around me and guided me up the stairs, assuring me that by the time we woke up in the morning, Bruno and Viktor would have taken care of everything.

I laid my head against his arm, and we stepped into the bedroom I now thought of as ours, all four of us, even though it had originally been Luca's.

Lynx and I both stopped at the sight of Dax and Luca on the balcony, kissing so passionately I couldn't help but smile.

Lynx grinned too.

I elbowed him and whispered, "Jealous?"

He thought about it for a second, then shrugged. "No. Something changed with the two of them when we were in that basement. I could see it, even by the time I was thrown in there."

I'd seen it too. The friendship that had become a brotherhood. I hadn't realized there was an attraction behind it too. And hell, maybe there was a bit of a trauma bond going on between the two of them, but it didn't matter to me.

As long as they were happy, so was I.

Lynx gazed down at me. "What are you smiling at?"

"Just over what a perv I am. Is it weird that I really like watching you guys together?"

He shrugged, tugging me down to sit on the bed beside him. "If you're a perv, then I am too. Should we give them some privacy?"

I grinned. "Nope. If they wanted privacy they wouldn't be kissing…oh wait, it turned into a hand job…on the balcony."

Lynx stifled a laugh, and I shushed him, not wanting Luca or Dax to notice us sitting there, gossiping and watching.

Lynx studied them for a moment. "I give Dax a seven on technique. Bit fast for my liking."

I held in a laugh. "Stop! You're awful." But then I frowned at him. "Wait, what do you rate my hand jobs? Higher or lower than Dax's?"

Lynx pretended to think that over. "Hard to say when you don't have your hand wrapped around my cock right now. Would be a lot easier to give you a score if it were."

"That would be really pervy."

"I think we already crossed that line when we noticed them but didn't immediately shut the door."

"We're going to Hell."

"For watching them get to second base?" he scoffed. "That's hardly the worst thing we've done tonight."

He had a point. The dead body in the basement was proof of that.

I nudged him. “I really want to know my score.”

He leaned in and kissed me. “Definitely a ten. No notes.”

I laughed. “Thanks.”

“You could give Dax some tips…oh wait, he’s doing the ball squeeze thing. Luca likes that.”

“So do you, I’ve noticed.”

“I like anything as long as it involves you touching me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Anything?”

“You’ve got that look on your face that scares me.”

I cuddled into his side and laughed quietly. “Are we completely messed up to be laughing and having sex after killing my own flesh and blood?”

“Do you think he felt guilty when he tried to blow our car up?”

If I had any lingering doubts over my moral compass, that evaporated them. “No.”

“So, we aren’t going to mourn a man who made his bed and is now lying in it.”

My thoughts flickered to my mom and what she’d do without my father to protect her. But I couldn’t bring myself to care. That was up to her and my brothers now. None of them had bothered to try to help me when I’d been pregnant and sold off into an arranged marriage.

I suddenly realized Luca and Dax were watching us, and I cleared my throat to get Lynx’s attention. He followed my line of sight to the glass sliding door.

Luca opened it, a single eyebrow raised. “Hey, perverts. You just sitting there watching like it’s a movie theater?”

Lynx grinned at him. “More like a live action stage play.”

Luca just shook his head.

Dax’s gaze fell to me, worry in his eyes.

I’d always been able to read him like a book. He was so incredibly sweet and big-hearted, I knew he was currently having a silent, internal battle with himself over whether he and Luca becoming something more than friends was a betrayal to me. I stood and crossed the room, taking both his cheeks between my hands.

I grinned at him. “That was hot.”

He laughed. “I would have talked to you first. If I’d…”

“If you’d known?” I supplied for him.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m hardly going to get upset over you messing around with Luca when I do the same thing.”

He touched his forehead to mine but then drew back an inch. “I don’t think we’re just messing around.”

I smiled softly. “I know.” I pressed my lips against his briefly, but as much as I wanted to deepen the kiss and take it further, I needed to say something else first.

I turned to Luca and moved to stand in front of him. “I do remember that night at the clubhouse and promising each other we’d kill our fathers. And you’re right. I couldn’t have been the one to pull the trigger. So what I should have said downstairs, what I’m saying now, is thank you for being the one who was brave enough to do it.”

He breathed out slowly, like he’d been holding on to tension.

Then a slow, wicked grin spread across his handsome face, the one I knew all too well. He smirked at me. “You gonna make it up to me the same way Dax did?”

I gaped at the two of them. “That was an apology hand job?”

Dax’s cheeks went red, but he shot Luca a dirty look.

“It was supposed to be an apology blow job, but Luca had a problem holding on long enough.”

Luca’s mouth dropped open.

Lynx reached over and put one finger beneath Luca’s stubbled jaw and snapped it shut.

I tried to hide my laughter but failed.

Luca quit glaring at Dax and turned it on me instead. “Oh, it’s funny, huh? Want me to show you exactly how long I can hold on, princess?”

I put my arms around his neck. “I really do.”

He practically growled as he grabbed me by the waistband of my pants and hauled me in closer. Two flicks of his fingers had them undone and his hand inside my panties.

I helped him along, toeing off my boots while his fingers rubbed over my clit, slow but firmly.

Instantly, little pulses of pleasure lit up behind his touch, helped along by the state I was already in from watching Dax fist Luca’s cock.

Luca used his free hand to tug my pants over the globes of my ass and down my thighs. I stepped out of them as he moved his fingers lower, searching for the arousal building at my opening.

My panties strained at the seams with having his big hand inside them, and he yanked them off me, a few of the stitches popping with how rough he was.

Fresh air from the open balcony door kissed my bare ass and thighs, and my pussy tingled at the opposing sensation of having Luca's warm fingers inside me, his solid body pressed up against mine.

I reached for him, for his cock that he'd neatly tucked away behind his pants, but he dodged, dropping down to his knees in front of me instead.

His hot tongue slid through my folds, and I moaned at the feel of him there.

I closed my eyes, but I was all too aware of Lynx joining us, stepping in behind me, reaching around and grabbing a handful of my tits through my clothes. He peered over my shoulder at Luca on his knees.

"Hey, Luca? We all know you're down there right now just to give your dick time to recover."

Luca didn't stop what he was doing. Didn't even look up. He just flipped his middle finger, the one that wasn't inside me, up at Lynx.

Lynx laughed and squeezed me, fondling me through the layers of my long-sleeved shirt and bra, but it was a maddening sensation when all I really wanted his fingers on my skin.

Lynx always seemed to know exactly what I needed.

He pulled my shirt off, his fingers making short work of the clasp on the back of my bra. We were so close to the open door, the property's expansive yard and driveway spread out below us.

"There's people down there!" I hissed at Lynx, holding my bra to my chest, even though I so badly wanted it gone so I could feel his fingers on my nipples.

He glanced over at the balcony. It was solid at the bottom, so it hid Luca insistently tonguing my pussy like he didn't have a care in the world. But it sure as hell wouldn't cover my tits, just flapping in the breeze if I let Lynx take my bra.

Viktor and Bruno were down there with a bunch of the other guys, probably cleaning up the mess we'd made.

Lynx leaned in and kissed my cheek, then my neck. He stayed there, kissing and licking and sucking on the sensitive spot behind my ear until I closed my eyes again, and my hand fell away from my chest, the bra going with it.

His lips rasped over my ear. “You’re so fucking beautiful like this Nyah. The whole world should see what you look like when you have a man between your legs and the other one desperate for a turn.”

I moaned, probably loud enough for Viktor and Bruno to hear through the open door, but it was impossible not to when Lynx spoke to me like that, and when Luca had been so diligently working every inch of my pussy.

I could see everything going on out there.

Which meant they could see everything going on up here, if they just tilted their heads in the right direction.

Bruno brought a car around to the front of the house, and his brother emerged a moment later, dragging a black plastic-wrapped figure with him. Tape bound what I knew was the body of my father, no doubt keeping a trail of blood from leaking out across the tiled entranceway.

I froze.

My entire body locked up.

And both guys felt it.

Luca stopped instantly, staring up at me from his knees. “Nyah?”

I couldn’t speak. What the hell was I supposed to say? Sorry I just got dried up because I was too busy watching your guys load a dead body into a car? And not just any dead body, the body of a man we’d killed. The body of the man who was supposed to be my family.

I should have felt sorrow.

All I felt was anger.

Lynx glanced over my shoulder. “They’re taking away the body.”

Luca rocked back on his heels and stood, making sure he was between me and the gruesome scene below me I couldn’t stop staring at.

He took it all away and gripped my chin, making sure I was focusing on him.

The spell of what was happening down below broke, and all I saw was his dark eyes. His lips shiny and pink with my arousal.

His grin, wicked as always.

He leaned in, so his lips tickled the shell of my ear. “Stop looking at them like you’re scared.” His breath kissed my goose-bumped skin. “Start looking at them like you’re the queen who ordered his head.”

A rush of power filled me so fast it gave me a dizzying rush. I stared at him, confused by the feeling, but suddenly understanding why men like him, like his father, could do what they did.

My brain screamed I didn’t want that sort of power. That it had the potential for evil. I’d seen it in Carlos and Enzo. Heard about what it had done to Luca.

And yet, some part of me whispered that he’d turned it around and used it for good. Used it to help his sister. To help me. He’d used it to change the course of power, and that was what was needed. There was no point in walking away from all of this. No point running and hiding, or in saying we didn’t want to be a part of it all. There would always be someone ready to fight to take our place.

We needed to stay here where we were. At the top, where we could change the way the system worked.

The beast needed a woman at its head.

A queen.

“Hold on to the doorframe, Nyah,” Luca whispered in my ear. “I want to fuck you while you watch them take away his body. I want you to come, knowing you have all the power here.”

I’d never said an easier yes.

I gripped the metal frame either side of me, Luca clutching my hips from behind. If he’d gone down on me because he was struggling to get hard, he had no problems now. He edged my legs apart with his knee, and his thick cock pushed inside me in one easy thrust, my pussy wet and weeping from all the work he’d already put in.

“Oh!” I moaned at him filling me with no remorse. “Fuck.”

He kissed my neck while he rocked his body into the back of mine. His hands came around me from behind, one finding my breast, the other searching for my clit.

I grabbed his hand and guided it to exactly where I needed it, and he fucked me hard and fast, getting me right to the edge before pulling out.

I stifled a gasp, but then it was forced from my mouth anyway as Lynx took his spot. He did the same thing, fucking me fast and hard from behind, playing with my tits, my clit, kissing any inch of me he could until I was right back there, too fast, on the edge of an orgasm I so desperately wanted, but they seemed determined to prolong.

Dax took his turn, sliding into me so slowly I could barely stand it. I ground back on him, my back arched, legs spread, gorgeous man behind me, his perfect cock filling me over and over again while I begged him to let me come.

I glanced over my shoulder at them, the three of them standing shoulder to shoulder.

Behind me.

My gaze locked with Luca's, and he leaned in to kiss me, not caring Dax was deep inside me, hitting spots that welcomed him with pleasure. Luca's lips were insistent, and too brief, but when he moved back, it was with certainty in his eyes.

"I've been calling you princess all this time."

"I liked it," I admitted, rocking back against Dax.

"I should have been calling you queen, Nyah. I see that now. None of this was ever supposed to be mine. It was supposed to be yours."

I breathed out a long, slow breath, fighting that rush of power that was so heady it felt like cocaine coursing through my blood. But when it settled, it came with a clearer head.

One that whispered I wasn't sure it was supposed to be mine either.

But none of it mattered right now, when the only thing I knew for sure was that *they* were supposed to be mine. The three of them.

And I would be forever theirs.

I kissed Luca. Then Lynx. Dax pounded into me until we both came together, my cries of pleasure echoing over the estate and drawing the looks of the men on the ground below us.

But I didn't shy away from their stares. I stared right back, while Lynx took Dax's spot, and Luca finished us off, pinching my nipples roughly, fucking me hard, making me cry out his name for everyone to hear while he shouted mine.

When Bruno and Viktor drove away with a body in the back of their car, there was no doubt to anyone within hearing distance what had happened here tonight.

I'd stopped being scared.

And stepped out into the light

Three men I loved at my back, the four of us ready to face whatever happened next.

Together.

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MACGREGOR

The black car slid past me almost silently, the crunch of the tires on the road the only noise the electric vehicle made. Luca's right-hand men, Viktor and Bruno, sat in the front seats. I hadn't even bothered approaching them. I remembered them and already knew they were too loyal to mess with. But I didn't miss the head bob from one of the men in the back seat of the car, and I returned it, even though I wasn't one-hundred-percent sure he could actually see more than just a shadowy outline of a man.

No one else in the car had looked my way.

No one up on that balcony had either.

I smiled at the pleasure on Nyah's pretty face. At the sounds of her moans, at the slapping of their bodies joining together in such a public way.

I gazed down at the baby in my arms, his cute face completely relaxed in sleep. "We need to have a word with your ma, wee one. But now is clearly not the time."

It would be soon. The fighter, the bodyguard, and poor dead Carlos's Mafia heir were keeping a close-knit circle on their woman. So close I hadn't been able to find a way to breach it.

Yet.

It was my fault for making a deal with Matish in the first place. Incompetent idiot. How many attempts did he need to make on Luca Guerra's life before he actually succeeded? Clearly more than two. I should

probably thank whichever of the four of them had ended that man's pathetic life. If they hadn't, I would have.

My patience had worn thin.

Luca Guerra needed to die.

And the baby I held in my arms would inherit everything.

Enzo and Matish both had the right idea. Kill Luca. Take control of the heir. Bask in the glory of controlling everything Carlos Guerra had worked for.

They just had none of the brains to pull it off.

"But I do, don't I, James?" I murmured to the baby. "While they're distracted searching for you, I'll make my move. I want that stake on American soil more than either of those two idiots did. And having your ma bouncing on my cock while I get it will just be a bonus."

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LYNX

Dear Diary,
Today Dax gave a cop his very first tattoo. Customer satisfaction was… mixed.

Liam was already seated in a back corner booth of his brother's restaurant when we arrived. He waved us over, and I led our group, nerves bouncing around my stomach, as they had been ever since I'd woken up that morning in a tangle of arms and legs, only to discover my lawyer wanted a meeting with us before he went to work that day.

Liam stood to shake my hand, then Dax's and Luca's. He kissed Nyah on the cheek, and she squeezed his arm.

He waved for us all to sit and motioned at the pile of toast and condiments in the middle of the table. "Eat something. It's still warm. Hayden doesn't do breakfast here at Sinners, they have more of a nighttime sort of clientele. Toast is my best offering when given free range of a closed restaurant."

I chuckled. "You mean people don't want to play in Hayden's not-so-secret sex maze before 10:00 a.m. on a weekday?"

Liam sniggered. "They probably do, but I don't think my brother wants to get out of bed that early."

Luca yawned. “Do any of us?” He glanced at Liam. “What’s up?”

Liam took a sip of his coffee and grimaced at the taste. Apparently, Liam didn’t do coffee all that well either. Or at least not with whatever he’d found in the Sinners’ kitchen. He focused on me. “First, this isn’t about James. And I don’t want you to worry too much. I haven’t heard anything major…”

The butterflies in my stomach intensified. “But you have heard something…”

Liam nodded.

I felt sick. At the same time, I knew I didn’t deserve to feel good about all the things I’d done that could be coming back to bite me in the ass. I’d killed people. People whose names I couldn’t even remember because I’d blacked out most of them.

I wasn’t like Reaper and the other guys in the Murder Squad who could all channel their darkness into killing from an approved list of targets. My urges didn’t run along the same rivers theirs did.

I didn’t eat, sleep, and breathe murder.

But when someone I loved was in danger, whether that be Nyah or Reaper or the people who had come before them, something in my brain just switched modes, and there was very little I could do to control it.

That left me vulnerable in a way I didn’t like.

It made me messy.

A killer who could be linked back to his crimes at any time because I didn’t even remember half of them, or if I’d cleaned them up well. “Rip the Band-Aid off. Just tell us.”

Liam tore open a little package of sugar and poured it into his coffee. “I don’t like what happened with you and the cops. I’m no stranger to how dirty they are. The fact you were held without charges, and then released—”

I choked on a laugh. “Released isn’t exactly the word I’d use for it. More like handed over for Jeremiah Matish to throw in a hole.”

Liam made a face. “That only makes it worse for me. He and the cops know you’re still alive. The stuff with James made you too public to touch, but now that’s all dying down, I think they’re just going to come after you again.”

Luca broke the crust on a piece of toast and crumbled it into smithereens. He didn’t look at Liam, but his question was definitely

directed at him. “And if we told you Jeremiah Matish was no longer a problem…”

Liam stared at him. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Nope,” all four of us replied in unison.

“We definitely don’t know anything about that,” Luca added dryly.

Liam’s expression said he clearly didn’t believe any of us. “I really miss the days where the hardest thing I had to do was get drunk high school kids out on bail.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Okay, so let’s just say Jeremiah Matish has taken a vacation and you don’t have to worry about him. But that cop who arrested you, he clearly knows things. What they did might not have been on the up and up because of whatever deal he had going on with Matish, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have enough to pin it on you. Legally. At the end of the day, they have a dead body with lynx marks on her back, and you were in the vicinity of where her body was found, with no alibi we can prove since the only alibi we actually do have is the Slayers’ gate footage, which actually shows you leaving.”

“Yeah. That’s not great, is it?” I asked him.

“Not exactly.” He took another mouthful of his coffee and quickly put it back down so he could tip another packet of sugar into it. “Listen. I don’t want to scare any of you. I know you have an awful lot on your plates right now, what with the baby and all, but when something keeps me awake at night, I like to get a handle on it. And this loose thread, the threat that you’re going to be exposed, is keeping me awake at night.”

The guys at Slayers had all told me Liam was a good guy. It was nice that he cared.

“So, what do we do?” I asked him.

He sighed heavily. “I mean, for starters? Have you killed anyone lately?”

Jeremiah’s dead body wrapped up in plastic and being put in the back of Bruno’s car just last night while we messed around on the balcony above them came to mind. I shook my head. “No.”

I mean, technically, that had been Luca’s kill, not mine.

“Well, that’s a start. No new bodies turning up is a good thing. But someone has framed you before, and that doesn’t mean it won’t happen again. The cops can do it a lot better than the average Joe Blow can, and if they need to make up some numbers, they could try pinning a whole lot

right on your back. I'm going to put some pressure on them to leave you alone."

"Pressure? What sort of pressure?"

He smiled at me. "Just a lot of paperwork. An official complaint of harassment and some other things we can busy them up with, make them not want to come near you unless they have a really good reason to."

"Paperwork and form filing. How scary," Luca muttered sarcastically under his breath.

I elbowed him.

"What?"

I didn't reply because I couldn't disagree with him. I didn't really think Liam filling out some details in block letters was really going to deter anyone from anything.

But if that helped him sleep better at night, then I wasn't going to stop him.

Liam finished his toast and brushed off his hands. "I gotta get going. Hang in there. Stay out of trouble. Hopefully this whole thing with the cops blows over, and they find something new to focus on. It would be nice if I stop hearing your name every time I'm in there."

I wasn't exactly known for being a smart man, but even I knew that was doubtful. The cops all had superiors to report to. Quotas to make. Solving Virginia's murder, the murder of a local mother, would look good for their department.

As an ex-con with motorcycle club affiliation, I was the world's easiest target.

I couldn't get thrown in jail again. I wanted to be here for Nyah when James was returned…or if he wasn't. I wanted to be here for Luca and for Dax and for the guys at the club.

I wanted to be here for the family I'd made for myself. This wasn't like the first time I'd gone to jail, where I'd had nothing to lose.

I glanced over at the three of them sitting around the table either side of me. I didn't want this to end.

Which meant I couldn't wait around for Liam to file his paperwork and to ask the cops politely if they wouldn't mind just letting me live in peace.

I needed to take matters into my own hands.

But I couldn't do it by myself.

"What are you all doing today?" I asked them.

Luca glanced at his watch. “I’ve got a meeting with the crew I sent down to Vegas to search for James and Enzo, and then hockey. I’m going to be late, actually.” He pushed to his feet.

Shit, I should have been going to that practice as well.

But my gut warned that I wouldn’t be going to any practices if I was back in jail.

“If it’s about James, I’m coming too.” Nyah took a final sip of her very bad coffee and stood to follow him.

Dax did the same. “I need to go to work. Reaper is doing a pretty big piece today, and I want to make sure I’m there if he has any questions.”

I nodded and followed the three of them out into the parking lot. Luca and Nyah got in his car, and Dax headed for his.

Luca paused with his hand on the steering wheel. “You coming with us, Lynx? The meeting won’t take long, then we can get ready for practice.”

I desperately wanted to. I wanted to look Luca’s guys in the eye and make sure they were telling us absolutely everything that was happening out there on the road. And then show up for my team the way I’d promised.

But I knew Luca had it handled and he’d be there to support Nyah through it. I would do what I needed to do quickly, and maybe I’d even get there in time for practice to start. We’d had many of those update meetings, and they were never easy because there was never anything solid to report. Possible sightings and leads that went nowhere. All of it frustrating and upsetting. Each one sent Nyah into a shell that I knew would only get harder and harder to pull her from if we didn’t figure this out soon.

There was only so long a woman could go without her child before she broke.

And Nyah was holding herself together with sticky tape.

It only strengthened my resolve to fix this problem of mine. Nyah couldn’t lose anyone else. None of us could.

“Mind if I skip it?” I asked Luca. “Got a few errands to run.” I glanced over at Dax. “Could I get a lift with you?”

He nodded quickly, pointing at the passenger side. “Yeah, of course. Get in.”

I waited until we’d both shut our doors, he’d started the engine, and Luca had steered toward the exit. Then I turned to Dax. “Can one of your brothers cover for you with Reaper today?”

He frowned while he glanced left and right, waiting for a break in the line of cars traveling along the main street of Providence, people all leaving their fancy homes to go to their fancy jobs in the city, most likely. “Probably. What’s wrong?”

“I need your help with something.”

He pulled into a gap, then looked over at me. “Why does that tone of voice scare me?”

I pressed my lips into a tight line. “Because you have good instincts. And what I’m going to ask you to do you might not like.”

We drove along in silence, and for a second of it, I was convinced he was going to say no. I wouldn’t have blamed him. If I’d been able to do this by myself, I would have.

“Why me? Why not Luca? It’s usually the two of you together.”

I chuckled at that. “Jealous?”

“What?” He shook his head fast. “No, definitely not.”

“Are you blushing?”

“No!”

I laughed, and it felt good to relieve some of the tension. “It’s okay if you are. I was a tiny bit jealous watching the two of you last night.”

He grimaced. “I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

“They aren’t,” I promised him. “I knew it was coming. There’s been something more between you and Luca ever since the church. I could see it even when I was first locked up with the two of you. Something had changed.”

“You could have warned me,” Dax muttered.

I couldn’t help laughing at him. “I’m sorry, I thought that as a fully grown man, you were probably aware when you wanted to fuck someone.”

He flapped a hand at me to be quiet, which was even funnier because it wasn’t like there was any one else in the car. “I don’t want to fuck him.”

“Your hand wrapped around his cock last night and the talk of blow jobs says otherwise.” I poked him in the arm. “So does how pink your cheeks are. And…are you breathing fast right now just thinking about it?”

“Fuck off.”

He so was. But I decided to let him off the hook. “So, you going to help me? All I need you to do is bring your tattoo kit and drive me to a house in Saint View. Hopefully Officer Rivera isn’t on duty this morning.”

“Do I even want to know why we’re going to the cop’s house with a tattoo kit?”

“Not just any cop, the one who held me in that cell and then delivered me into Matish’s hands.”

“I hadn’t forgotten.”

“So you’re in?”

Dax sighed heavily. “I’m in. What’s the address?”

Rivera’s house was in the shittiest part of Saint View. The yard was overgrown and littered with junk. The roof sagged, and the entire building seemed like it might collapse at any minute.

“This place is a dump.” Dax peered through the windshield at the shack of a house.

“Guess cop pay isn’t all that good. Makes me understand why he’d be in with someone like Matish. He clearly needed whatever he was paying him.”

We’d stopped via the shop so Dax could grab his kit and organize for Roarke to watch over Reaper’s work. Which had cost Dax the hefty price of reconciling the shop’s end-of-month bookkeeping so Roarke could go out of town with his latest fling.

Dax had shot me a look, like whatever we were doing today had better be worth the price of him trying to work out a spreadsheet.

Poor, poor creative soul. He hated math.

“Well, we’re here. We might as well get it done.” I opened the car door.

Dax grabbed my arm. “Wait. Are we hurting him? Killing him? Like, what exactly is the plan here, Lynx? I’m not up for killing anyone. You really should have brought Luca if that’s the aim.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “I promise, I brought the right man for the job. Just trust me.”

“I do.”

I blinked. “You said that without even hesitating.”

“Why wouldn’t I? We’re…” He shrugged. “I don’t know. Something.”

“Partners?”

“Like in a western? ’Cause I’m sure you don’t mean like boyfriends.”

I tried again. “A foursome?”

“That makes it sound like all we are is sex. And you and I aren’t even doing that.”

“Fair point. How about we just say we’re family?”

A smile turned up the corner of his mouth. “I guess. Though for the record, I don’t watch any of the rest of my family while they’re fucking.”

I shoved him toward his door. “Neither do I, though thanks for giving me the mental image of me watching my parents get it on.”

Dax snorted on his laughter.

I just shoved his shoulder toward his door. “Let’s just do this already. Bring your kit.”

We both got out, Dax clutching his equipment in one hand. We moved along the path acting as casual as possible, but I didn’t miss the way he discreetly covered my back, walking a step or two behind me, both our heads on a swivel, senses alert.

Dax might not have wanted to kill anyone, but I’d seen the man in a boxing ring. He could more than hold his own with nothing more than his fists.

I wasn’t as adept, so I’d be relying on my charm and whatever weapon I could find in Officer Rivera’s house.

I toed a couple of empty beer bottles out of the way so I could get up the man’s front steps, then thought better of it and scooped to pick one up.

Dax raised a questioning eyebrow.

I shrugged. “Just in case.”

“Mmm-hmm. Remember what Liam said about not killing anyone?”

“I know, I know.” Dax was such a dad.

I wished I hadn’t had that thought because it made my heart hurt that he wasn’t getting to use that disapproving parental frown on his actual son. I really hoped there’d be some news from Luca’s guys today. Something concrete. Something we could follow.

I needed that little boy home just as much as Dax did.

Dax poked me in the back. “Whatever you’re thinking about, stop it. Focus.”

He was right. I shook off the guilt over not being out there searching for Nyah’s baby, and focused on being here, in the moment, doing something else that needed to be done.

With the beer bottle tucked neatly behind my back, I rapped my knuckles across Rivera’s door.

I waited for the sound of footsteps, but none came.

“Maybe he’s at work?”

I glanced over at the cracked concrete driveway and the car sitting in the middle of it. “Car’s still here. And the police department is all the way over in Providence.”

“He might have gotten a ride.”

“And let any of his cop buddies see the sort of squalor he lives in? Doubtful.”

I knocked again. This time I heard something on the other side.

“He’s definitely in there,” I murmured to Dax.

“Oh goodie,” he mumbled back. “He’s probably just getting ready to arrest us.”

“For what?”

“Trespassing on his property?”

“We’re standing on his porch.”

He leaned around me and twisted the doorknob. It turned, and the door swung open silently. “Now we’re not.”

Technically, we hadn’t moved our feet, but I got his point.

“Hello?” I called out, taking a step inside. “Anyone home?”

“Fuck off! I don’t have your money!”

I glanced back at Dax. The voice had sounded more like a drunken slur than anything else. Which might have explained the copious amounts of empty beer bottles on the porch. I led us through the small house, in the direction of Rivera’s voice, and came to a half-open bedroom door. I nudged it fully open with my foot.

“I told you, I don’t have your money!”

“You don’t owe me any money.”

Rivera lifted his head from where he’d obviously passed out on the floor halfway to his bed at some point last night. “Who the fuck are you?”

It was rich that he didn’t recognize me. Frankly, it pissed me off. I squatted beside the man and tried not to breathe in the stale alcohol stench practically radiating from him. “You really don’t know? Do I look different when I’m not locked up in one of your holding cells without a charge? Or is it because it’s not dark, and you aren’t handing me over to Jeremiah Matish in some alleyway?”

He lifted his head to squint at me then dropped it back to the floor. “Oh. You. I thought you were dead.”

I rolled my eyes. So much for Liam's concerns, if the cops all assumed Matish had killed me. I patted him on his head, as condescendingly as possible. "Unfortunately for you, no. I'm not."

Dax nudged me with his knee. "He's not even going to remember this when he sobers up. If the cops aren't interested in you, we could just leave."

That would have probably been the smarter plan. But all I could think about was it all happening again. Just when I thought my life was on track, it all coming back to bite me. Liam had said he'd heard things. Rumblings from within the police department.

Somebody suspected me.

And besides all that, this asshole had kept me locked in a box until he'd delivered me to Matish for more of the same. He was as corrupt as they came, so I wasn't going to feel bad about what we did next.

"Who do you owe money to?" I asked the man.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Everyone."

"Explains why you took a bribe from Matish."

"He paid well for you."

"Yeah, I bet he did. You going to leave me alone now?"

The hungover man laughed. "Sure. Sure."

I rocked back on my heels. "You don't sound sure."

"You're the Lynx Killer, right? It's only a matter of time before you're back behind bars. Hopefully, I can find someone else willing to pay me to let you out." He laughed like there was actually something funny about what he'd said. "The boss was pissed about letting you go the first time, but I got so much dirt on him, I do what I want."

I raised an eyebrow. "That so?"

He nodded, which seemed like an effort while he was still lying on his back on the dirty carpet. "They want you bad. You should probably run away, little Lynx Killer. Run far, far away." His voice had that singsong quality of someone who was still five sheets to the wind. "'Cause we gonna getcha!" He snapped his teeth in my direction.

I flinched back.

Even though his voice was slurred and he was no danger to me in his current state, his words had the power to strike fear inside me. Fear that Liam had been right, the cops were brewing something, and I was just walking along, going about my life with no idea it was all going to crumble in on me.

That terrified me.

I leaned into the man's face. "I'm going to need you and your cop buddies to forget about the fact I exist."

"No can do. You're top of the list."

"Then make it so I'm not."

The man laughed at me. "Why would I do that?"

"You've got all the dirt on your boss. Use it."

He laughed his foul alcohol breath into my face. "Yeah. Sure. I'll do that for you out of the goodness of my heart. Pay me and I'll consider it."

I looked over at Dax.

He shrugged. "How much do you want?"

"A million dollars."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, and I want to fly to the moon."

"Two million 'cause I don't like your smart-ass attitude."

That red haze of anger teetered at the edge of my subconscious. I tried to suck in some deep breaths, but it didn't do much to help. "Or, I could just kill you right here, right now." I leaned down and lowered my voice to a whisper. "Since I am the Lynx Killer after all."

That finally got through Rivera's thick skull. He shifted onto his side, trying to scramble away from me.

It was child's play to grab his shoulder and pin him back down.

He stared up at me, fear in his eyes for the first time. "I'll help you. I'll get my boss to focus on someone else. We can find other suspects."

I clucked my tongue. "See, thing is, now I don't believe you. You literally just told me you wanted two million dollars, and now you're telling me you'll do it for free?"

He struggled beneath my heavy grip on his shoulder. "Completely free."

I leaned in closer to him. "Liar."

"I'm not. I swear! I'll do it."

I shook my head. "Sorry. That offer already expired. But don't worry, I have a new one."

I shoved the man over onto his stomach.

He yelped as I kneeled on his back and pinned his arms down. He struggled to fight me off, his head turned to one side while he cussed me out, but his attempts were feeble. Easily silenced with my knee digging into his spine.

“You think you know all the things about me. So tell me, Rivera. How did I kill my victims?”

His wide eyes flickered as he tried to crane his head enough to see me.

“Start talking, or I’ll just show you…”

“You stab them! Then carve your calling card on their backs!”

“Sound like a fun way to die to you?” I yanked his shirt up, exposing the naked skin covering his spine.

“No.” There was a sob in his voice as it finally sank in that he was in a very bad position.

Dax watched from his position leaning against the wall, but he didn’t say anything.

I shifted my knee in Rivera’s back. “Lucky for you, I don’t have a knife here.”

Relief made him floppy. The scent of piss filled the air, and I wrinkled my nose at the disgusting tang.

“I swear, I’ll get the guys to back off you. You won’t hear from us.”

“That’s good. Real good. For you. Because see, the thing is, I know I’ve left a trail of evidence. But I don’t want to go back to prison for it.” I traced a claw-shaped mark absentmindedly with my fingernail across his shoulder blades. “So my buddy here, he’s going to give you some new ink.”

Dax raised an eyebrow. “I am?”

I nodded, waving him over. “What color do you like, Rivera? You a black-and-gray sort of tattoo man? Or do you like colors?”

“I…I don’t have any tattoos. I don’t like them.”

“Well, that’s fucking insulting to my friend here. You’re insulting his art. And you’re about to get your first piece. Unlucky for you, it’s going to be a massive back piece. So I really hope you didn’t have any plans today, because those do tend to take a good few hours.”

Dax pulled out his tattoo gun and inks and an array of other equipment, setting up a makeshift station. “What exactly am I inking on this guy?”

I grinned at him. “Lynx claws.”

Dax paused. “Seriously?”

I nodded, then patted Rivera on the back. “Don’t worry. I’m going to show him exactly how I carve them into my victims. And when this is all said and done, I don’t care if you have to use every dirty secret you have on your boss. I don’t care if you have to get on your knees and suck his fat cock every day for the rest of your career, but you’re going to get him to

drop this case and never pick it up again. And if you don't? I'm going to go on a killing spree. I'm going to drop a victim on your doorstep every night, with your exact tattoo carved into their backs." I leaned down so my lips were right next to his ear. "Get the cops to move on, or I'll make sure you're who they're looking at. How do you think you'd go in prison with all the men you've put away over the years? I'm betting at least one of them would be *real* happy to see you sharing their cell."

Rivera trembled beneath me. I didn't get off on it, the way I knew some of the other guys would have.

I just wanted to be left alone. For my past to stay in the past and to pray I could keep it there.

The buzz of Dax's tattoo gun filled the room.

And then Rivera's screams of pain as Dax started outlining the huge tattoo on the man's virgin skin.

I shoved a sock in the officer's mouth. "First thing you should know about getting a tattoo? The spine hurts the worst."

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
I accidentally told an entire hockey team I had four orgasms. It was actually five.

"You pick some strange places to hold business meetings."

"It's just efficient. I need to be at practice later. Having a meeting here beforehand saved me going to two different locations." Luca held the rink door open.

I passed in front of him. The cold blast of air, now a familiar part of my days, hit me in the face, and I shivered, closing my jacket tighter across my chest.

Luca noticed and pulled off his Saint View Vipers owner jacket, draping it around my shoulders.

I shook my head, trying to push it back at him. "You'll freeze in just your shirt."

"I'd rather that than you freeze."

I eyed him. "You're being suspiciously nice."

He led the way down to the players' locker room. "Don't say I can't be romantic."

I snorted. “Is this your idea of romance? Giving me the jacket that’s been kicking around the trunk of your car, and taking me to a hockey rink locker room that smells questionable at best, condemnable at worst?”

He reached back for my hand, and I smiled to myself as I took it.

But then he added, “I thought you liked the smell of sweaty men surrounding you? You didn’t seem to mind it so much when it was me, Dax, and Lynx. In fact, I have it on good authority you enjoyed that so much you came four times—”

I slapped his arm, hard, because he definitely wasn’t being quiet, and anyone could have heard him advertising to the entire world how much I had enjoyed being in a four-way sandwich just the night before.

We stepped inside the locker room and froze.

Bruno, Viktor, and a few of Luca’s other guys were all sitting there.

Judging by the way they all fought back laughter, they’d heard every word.

Hot embarrassment crawled up my neck, and my gut instinct was to glare at Luca and threaten to murder him. But Luca didn’t seem bothered at all. It occurred to me that if these guys currently sniggering had been involved in a foursome with three women, they wouldn’t be walking into this room feeling embarrassed about it the next morning.

They’d be walking in bragging.

I lifted my chin. “It was five times actually.”

The laughter exploded in the room, no one able to hold it back any longer. Bruno and Viktor both reached-out fists for me to bump, amusement in their smiles.

I winked at them and took a seat on a bench in the corner. Despite Luca saying we were late, none of the players were due in for another twenty minutes, so it was just Luca’s guys, all of them in suits, all of them looking to Luca, standing at the front of the room.

Luca waited for someone to say something, but the laughter that had been plentiful a moment before quickly faded as each of the guys glanced at one another. Clearly, something had happened, and yet none of them wanted to be the ones to say it.

A slow, sick feeling swirled in my stomach.

I suspected Luca was feeling it too.

His lips thinned into a grim line, and his gaze flickered from man to man, eventually settling on Bruno. “Spit it out. What’s happened?”

Bruno grimaced. “We got word this morning from one of the teams. Maybe Nyah…”

I opened my mouth to remind Bruno I wasn’t some weak woman who was going to fall apart at whatever he said. Even though on the inside, ice was rapidly spreading through my veins.

But I didn’t need to say anything. Because Luca did it for me. “Say whatever you need to say. She can take it.”

Bruno nodded at the direct instruction. “They found a body this morning. Enzo’s. Gunshot wound, point-blank.”

I fought back the urge to vomit. “And James?”

Viktor gave a small shake of his head. “No sign of him. Sorry, Nyah.”

I turned away, staring at the wall for a few seconds and blinking fast. Because I wanted to be the strong woman Luca had just told them I was.

But that didn’t mean my arms didn’t ache for not having my baby in them. There was no amount of mental or physical strength that could ever make that hurt disappear.

Luca swore under his breath. “What do we know about his death?”

Bruno explained, “They think it happened a few days ago, due to the state of the body. Maybe even up to a week.”

Luca stared at him. “A week? What about the woman we saw on the video footage?”

“No sign of her, boss. Either she has the baby…”

“Or she met the same fate Enzo did and is dead somewhere, her body being picked apart by dessert birds and animals?”

Bruno nodded. “That was the assumption the guys made. They’re looking for any traces of her but have come up empty-handed. They have nothing on the baby either.”

Luca slammed his fist into the locker behind him, the metal clanging sharply. “Fuck! Why the hell are we always five steps behind?” He shook his fist out and swore again at the instant ugly red mark spreading across his knuckles. “Fuck!”

From the doorway, someone cleared their throat, and French stuck his head in. “Is this a bad time? We have practice, and I’m early, so we can come back later, if you want?”

Luca was too busy cursing over his beaten-up fingers, and the rest of the guys said nothing. I stood and forced a smile at the twenty-something

golden boy Carlos had bought for the team, making small talk until Luca could compose himself. “Hey, French. How’s your sister?”

He frowned at me in confusion.

“I met her briefly at the press conference. She was so proud of you, sitting up there in front of the reporters.”

His expression smoothed over. “Oh. Right.” He cracked his neck and looked away, not answering my question.

I grimaced, realizing I’d stuck my nose somewhere it didn’t belong. Obviously, there was some family tension there that was definitely not any of my business. “Anyway, I think we’re done here. And it’s your locker room. We’ll leave.”

Luca’s guys all stood, filing out one by one, Luca calling after Viktor and Bruno to hang around because he wasn’t done discussing things. They told him they’d wait in the bleachers, and I went to follow them, leaving Luca to talk to his team alone.

But French caught my hand as I tried to walk past him. “Wait, Nyah? Sorry. I’ve got a lot on my mind, but can you stay a moment? There’s something we wanted to show you.”

I glanced over at Luca, and he shrugged, clearly no idea what this was about.

I took a step back from the doorway so French and the guys could all file through. He went to his locker, dumping a white cloth sack full of something down on the bench. He tugged a drawstring to undo it and emptied the bag full of jerseys out.

“Forgive me for being naïve, but what exactly am I looking at?” I asked him. “I’ve seen your jerseys before… Is it because they’re actually clean for once?”

The guys all chuckled, and French shook his head, but he smiled as he picked up the one with his name and number on the back. “No. But we had a little addition made. Hope you don’t mind.” He fit the jersey over his head.

I instantly understood what he meant.

The Vipers jerseys were mostly white and black with a few hints of deep purple that glinted in the snake’s scales.

But now they had the addition of a bright, aqua arm band.

My son’s name printed in the middle.

I snapped my gaze up to French's. "You put James's name on your uniforms?"

He nodded, staring at me. "I noticed the media has died off a little lately, and I just…I know how important family is. I wanted to do something to bring the focus back. We didn't want to do a black armband, since that signifies…"

"A death of someone important to the team," I barely whispered.

"So we did a blue one. Since its part of his name." He shrugged. "I really want you to get your son back."

There was a ripple of agreement around the team, and I had to do a fast blink to keep the tears at bay.

I stepped in and hugged French, squeezing him tight. "Thank you."

For a moment, he didn't really return the hug, but then his arms came around me slowly, and he squeezed me. "It's the least I can do. I'm so sorry."

People had said those same words over and over again for the last few months. And I knew they all meant well, but it was mostly said in an offhand tone, like they knew they should say something and that felt like the standard response.

But when French said it, his voice was filled with so much emotion, and he held me tighter, for longer than was socially acceptable. So long, I eventually stepped back and looked at him questioningly.

"Are you okay?"

He pulled his shoulders back and lifted his head. "Of course."

He turned away quickly, and I realized I'd probably embarrassed him. I mentally kicked myself for making a big deal over a man in his twenties actually having feelings, especially in a setting like this, where it was all hockey and testosterone and growling.

I moved across the room to Luca and studied his rapidly swelling hand.

I rolled my eyes. "You're an idiot."

"I'm an idiot with a probably broken hand," he complained.

I grinned and pointed down the corridor toward the rink. "Plenty of ice out there."

"Your jokes are so bad." But he did smile.

I tucked my arm into his. "Come on. We'll get one of the guys to scrape some up for you."

"Or we could just check the first aid kit?"

“Boring, but sure.”

A few minutes later, we had an ice pack and took a seat on the bottom row of the bleachers, Bruno and Viktor sitting behind us so they could finish their conversation with Luca.

I listened but watched the guys walking out from the locker room and stepping onto the ice. They made slow, lazy laps of the rink, warming up. Nobody paid us any attention. No one but French, who kept peeking over in our direction.

Luca eventually leaned in, his mouth close to my ear. “I think you have your first groupie.”

“You?”

He laughed. “French.”

I made a face. “He’s a baby.”

“He’s a fully grown man who has the hots for you.”

“He definitely does not. I’m old enough to be his mother.”

“You would have been about seven when you had him if that was the case.”

I waved him off. “You know what I mean. I’m sure he has puck bunnies lining up. He does not need to lust after an old woman who already has more men than she knows what to do with, and a post-partum belly.”

His hand slid over my stomach. “Don’t talk about my favorite part of you with that tone.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “My belly is not your favorite part of me.”

His thumb found a gap between my pants and top and stroked across my stretch-marked skin. “Every part of you is my favorite.”

I kissed him, then murmured over his lips, “Why are you being sweet?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone think I’m such an asshole?”

“Because you are one?”

He frowned at me, but a shout from the ice cut him off.

French was down, the other players forming a circle around him.

Luca stood and put a hand on the low railing. “Let’s go, French!” he called out. “This isn’t soccer. On your feet!”

A howl of pain came from the ice. “Someone call an ambulance!”

Luca grimaced.

“See what I mean about you being an asshole?” I muttered, but I already had my phone out and was dialing 911. I leaned over the railing as far as I could. “What’s going on?”

Devenish knelt at French's head. "I don't know. He just went down hard; his eyes aren't focusing…"

Luca jumped the railing, landing on the ice in his dress shoes. He managed to make it across to where French lay and shouted for the others to give him some air. I relayed as much information as I could to the 911 operator, and she assured me they'd have paramedics out as soon as possible.

"Don't move him!"

Luca looked at me. "He's lying on the ice. How long can he stay there for? He'll end up with ice burns. Or hypothermia."

I shook my head. "He's got padding. He could have a spinal injury."

Luca went green at that idea. He stared at the other players. "What the fuck happened? Did he take a hard hit or something?"

But nobody seemed to know.

My gut churned, watching French lie there on the ice. It felt like a lifetime before sirens wailed outside and the paramedics walked in with a gurney and their medical bags.

They worked quickly, strapping a brace around French's neck and doing some other checks. He was conscious but he clutched at Luca's arm in panic.

The paramedics tried to assure him his vitals were good and he was stable, but French fought with them, disoriented by their unfamiliar faces.

I met them at the gate and jogged alongside. "Do you want me to call your sister? Or someone else? Your parents? A girlfriend?"

French's voice was frantic. "No! Please, no." His gaze darted around, completely unfocused with fear.

Luca grabbed his hand. "Hey, hey. Look at me. You're good. You're safe. We're just taking you to the hospital to get you checked out."

"What?…Luca, please…I hate hospitals."

Luca peered down at him. "You want Devenish or one of the other guys to go with you?"

French glanced at the other guys all standing in a huddle, watching. Red embarrassment stained his cheeks. "No, it's fine. I'm being dumb."

I really hated how stupidly macho this sport was sometimes. The guy probably had a concussion. There was no shame in not wanting to be alone when you were disoriented and in pain.

Luca patted his shoulder. “Club policy. Nobody goes to the hospital alone. If you don’t want one of the guys, you got me.”

I smiled to myself because I was ninety-nine-percent sure Luca had just made that policy up on the spot. He grabbed his keys from his pocket and tossed them at me. “Take my car.” He glanced past me to Viktor and Bruno. “Drive her home. She doesn’t go alone.”

Part of me wanted to complain about him demanding I have a babysitter. It was a little stifling to never be alone.

But I also wasn’t an idiot. My own father had tried to have us all murdered not all that long ago, and even though he was no longer a problem, I somehow doubted that meant we were home free.

Luca would never fully escape his name. There would always be dangers in being associated with him.

And yet, he was worth every one of them.

He walked out of the rink gripping French’s hand and reassuring him he was going to be just fine.

It reminded me he really wasn’t an asshole at all.

Viktor and Bruno took their jobs incredibly seriously and bundled me into the back seat of Luca’s car. For the sake of my feminism, I reminded them I was perfectly capable of driving myself, then handed over the keys when they just stared at me. We all knew they were never going to agree to me driving when their boss had given them a direct order.

It suited me. I tried calling Lynx and Dax but when neither answered, I hunched over my phone and typed out text messages telling them what had happened to French and that Luca was headed up to the hospital with him in the back of an ambulance.

I stared at my phone for a minute, waiting for either of them to reply but nothing came and I dropped my phone onto the seat beside me.

It was only then I realized I had no idea where we were. I leaned over, peering through the windshield at the unfamiliar road. “Uh, where are we?”

Viktor twisted to face me. “Backroad to the Guerra house.”

I peered out the window again and tried to identify where we were. But I hadn't grown up in this town, so while I'd been here long enough to know the main roads and how to get from place to place in the most direct way possible, I definitely didn't know the area well enough to be taking short cuts.

I sat back against the car's plush interior. But every turn of the car took me deeper into an area I didn't recognize, and unease grew in the pit of my belly. I reached for my phone, questioning the brothers while I was at it. "Why didn't we just take the main road?"

Bruno glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "You didn't notice the roadwork? The entire street was cut off."

I hadn't, but I couldn't exactly argue that he was lying either, because stupid me hadn't been paying attention. I'd been too busy trying to contact Lynx and Dax.

I still hadn't gotten a response from either of them.

"I'm calling Luca," I said, a little too loudly.

Neither brother responded.

I found his number and was about to push it when Bruno made a left hand turn onto a road, and I realized I knew exactly where I was.

"Well, you're a dumbass, aren't you, Nyah?" I muttered to myself, putting my phone back down.

"What was that?" Viktor asked.

"Nothing," I assured him quickly, then much lower beneath my breath. "Nothing except thinking I was being abducted when really all I have is a bad sense of direction."

I felt stupider by the mile, as Bruno steered the car back to the Guerra mansion. They punched the code in at the gate, and rolled the car into the driveway, parking it in its normal spot right in front of the doors. I grabbed my phone, checking again for a reply text from one of the guys, while Viktor got out, and Bruno stopped in front of my door to open it for me.

A noise crackled through the air.

One I didn't recognize or understand. One I maybe only heard because the door was open and everything around us was silent.

I don't even think a bird chirped.

Maybe that should have been a sign.

Animals always sense evil.

Bruno let out a grunt, his knees buckling.

Something sprayed across me, but I reached for him without even thinking, startled by the shock on his face.

For half a second, I thought I was watching the fit, thirty-something man have a heart attack.

But then the noise came again.

And Viktor wasn't as quiet as his brother. His shout of pain echoed across the empty driveway.

With horror, I realized that the mist of spray I'd caught was blood.

Bruno clutched his side and slid to the ground. With his free hand he pulled a gun, wildly firing three rounds into the air, shooting at something that couldn't be seen.

"Bruno!" I couldn't get out of the car. His body blocked me, like he was trying to protect me, and guilt rushed in that just moments earlier I'd been so sure this man was taking me somewhere to kill me.

How wrong I'd been.

Beyond him, Viktor didn't move, his blood staining the grass beneath him.

I grabbed for Bruno, trying to drag him into the car, but it was a losing battle. The man was a dead weight, his eyes fluttering as he fought to stay conscious.

His gun went limp in his hand.

I reached for it too late.

Someone else snatched it and tossed it aside. He caught Bruno by the back of his collar and dragged him across the driveway, leaving him for dead on the bloodstained concrete.

I screamed, trying to get to Bruno, battling with a seat belt I couldn't get undone because my fingers shook so violently. My brain whispered it was too late to do anything but save myself.

Their killer ducked his head to peer into the car at me, a gun with a silencer clutched in one hand. "Ah, lass. It's good to see your sweet face again. Have ye missed me?"

MacGregor's Scottish accent was easily recognizable, but I was barely aware of the words he spoke. My brain even managed to black out the two men who had just been shot right in front of me.

All I could focus on was the baby in MacGregor's other arm, his eyes closed in sleep, his rosebud mouth free of the stress and tension of the scene playing out around him.

MacGregor smiled at me. “A mother always recognizes her child, doesn’t she?”

I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. Just acted on impulse.

That impulse didn’t remind me that the man holding my son was a cold-blooded killer, thick in the Mafia underworld.

All I could do was reach for my baby, tears rolling down my face.

All I could whisper was, “Please.”

MacGregor nodded at me. “Aye, lass. Here he is. Safe and well. He’s a bonny lad. We’ve been having a wonderful time since Uncle Enzo met an untimely end.”

I didn’t care about any of it. About what he’d done to Enzo. About what had happened before or after. I’d go to Hell, but I couldn’t even think to try to get help for Viktor or Bruno.

My entire body trembled. “Please give him to me.”

MacGregor put the baby in my arms.

It took a moment for his warmth to soak through my blood-spattered clothes. But when it did, God, it was the best thing I’d ever felt. He was heavier than he’d been, his cheeks rounded, a little crusted milk at the corner of his perfect lips.

But I would have known that baby anywhere. It didn’t matter I’d only seen him for minutes after his birth, and he looked different now at almost two months old.

He’d grown inside me. And my heart knew.

I leaned down to press my lips to his velvet head, trying to stop the full-body shakes for fear I’d drop him.

MacGregor leaned on the open door. “It’s good to see him back where he belongs.”

I finally dragged my gaze off James’s face. “Please don’t take him from me again. I can’t…I won’t survive it…whatever you want, I’ll do. Just please don’t take him from me.”

And I meant every word. I loved Dax and Luca and Lynx. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for them, except this one thing.

I couldn’t give James up. Not for anyone, no matter how much I loved them.

MacGregor chuckled. “Why would I want to do that? I have everything I want. My woman. My child. The entire Guerra empire at my control…”

I snapped my head up. “Luca…”

MacGregor’s smile was slow and wide. “Don’t worry, lass. He’s taken care of.”

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LUCA

Dear Diary,
Next time someone asks me to stay at the hospital, I'm leaving.

French didn't talk much in the ambulance. The paramedic kept reassuring him he was fine, that he'd get a full checkup at the hospital but all his vitals were good. She questioned whether he'd eaten enough that morning, and if he'd felt dizzy before getting on the ice, but French had barely mumbled answers to any of her questions.

I didn't say anything, just tried to stay out of the way and let the woman do her job.

At the hospital, it was more of the same, French being asked question after question that he barely answered. He kept shooting little looks at me, his leg bouncing nervously, and there was a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

At one point, I pulled a nurse aside. "I know you all keep saying he's fine, but he's not. I've never seen him like this. He's normally much more focused."

She patted me on the arm. "Could just be shock. Fainting is never a pleasant experience. We don't think he's seriously injured but we are going to keep him overnight. He needs his head scanned, just in case he hit it

when he fell, and we'll keep an eye on him for a concussion." She smiled at me. "You're his coach?"

"Sort of. Owner of the team."

Really, French was more the coach than I was. He was the only reason there even still was a team, after Lynx and I had abandoned it completely to search for James.

"It's nice of you to stay with him. He didn't want us to call his family. He has a sister listed as his next of kin, but he was very adamant we didn't try to call her."

I nodded. That fit French's personality. He wouldn't want to worry anyone. "It's fine. I can stay a while longer. At least 'til he gets his head scanned."

The nurse checked her watch. "Might be a few more hours yet."

Guilt ate away at me over French being in here. He was a good guy, and the Saint View ER was hell on earth, no matter what time of the day you turned up. The sounds of pain surrounded us, a woman moaning, someone shouting at the nurse over how long they'd waited, a junkie strapped down in a bed surrounded by closed curtains…

I grabbed the nurse's hand before she could walk away. "Are there any private rooms available?"

She laughed. "That's not how this works, honey."

I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and started taking out hundred-dollar bills. "How many of these do I need to lay down to make it work that way?"

Her eyes bulged as the hundreds kept coming. I didn't care how much I had to pay her. I didn't want any of my father's money. I had no idea what I was going to do in the future, but it sure as hell wasn't going to be running drugs and trafficking women like my father had.

Maybe it would be owning a very average Saint View hockey team.

The thought almost made me laugh. It had been the last thing I'd wanted to do, and now it was the only thing I could stomach.

The nurse waited until I'd coughed up every note I had in my wallet, and I rolled my eyes when she picked it all up and pocketed it.

"You know, I think we just had a room open up." She leaned backward to peer at a whiteboard down the hallway. "Room 303. I'll have someone wheel him up."

French, along with the rest of the nursing staff, seemed surprised when a few minutes later he was on his way up to a private room. The woman I'd paid off just put her hand in her pocket, no doubt happily fondling the cash she'd made that night.

"You should go home," French said quietly when we were alone in his new room. Which was old and outdated but at least it had a door we could close.

"After you get your brain scanned."

French sighed, then nodded. "I need to piss."

I eyed him. "I'm happy to hold your hand, but please don't ask me to hold your cock too."

That got a tiny smile out of him. He got off the bed just fine and crossed the room without a wobble. I kicked my feet up on the bed and fiddled with the remote, trying to get the tiny TV mounted above the bed to turn on. "What do you want to watch?" I called out when the toilet flushed. "I think we have exactly three options. News. Some sort of romantic movie. Or football."

The door to the bathroom opened.

"Football, right?" I asked him, not even bothering to turn around as he came up behind me.

His hand landed on my shoulder.

Something sharp dragged along my neck.

"Please don't move," he whispered.

I froze.

In the reflection of the black, shut-down heart rate monitor screen across the bed, French stood with a syringe pointed at my neck.

I tried to breathe evenly and calmly, even though I wanted to lose my shit.

Being a nice guy was so fucking overrated. "What are you doing, French?"

"I don't want to. He's making me."

"Who is?"

"I can't say."

"Well, I can't help you if you don't."

French choked out a laugh. "You can't help me anyway. Nobody can."

"Try me."

The syringe scraped over my neck, and I winced, fighting the urge to try to turn around and take French on head-to-head.

I knew he had that needle aimed right at my jugular. And I knew he understood enough about human anatomy, all athletes did, that it wasn't held there by accident.

This little shit was actually seriously thinking about injecting me with something. "Okay, if you don't want to talk, let me. Someone came to you, told you they'd pay you a whole lot of money if you took me out, how does that sound?"

"Half right."

"Only half?" I pondered that for a second. "Which half?"

"The part about killing you is correct. But I don't get any money."

"Just doing it for the love of death then? Or to try something new? Can't say I picked you as a murderer to be honest. You're so clean-cut. And you always do the right thing."

"None of that. They have my sister."

I nodded. "Ah. Blackmail. Why didn't you come to me?"

"They said they'd kill her if I did."

I laughed at that. "And you believed them?"

His expression in the monitor screen was riddled with panic. "Of course I did! They fucking took her from her college dorm room, Luca! Sent me photos and video of her tied up in some cage and screaming for me to help her. What the fuck was I supposed to do?"

I waved a hand at him. "Okay. Calm down. Was it my uncle? Who, by the way, is dead, so if it was him, let's just forget this whole thing right now."

Luca stared at me in the reflection. "How the hell are you so calm about this? I'm holding a syringe full of something that will kill you, and you're having a chat like it's a Sunday brunch?"

"Not my first rodeo, kid. And you aren't going to kill me."

"You don't know that."

"You would have already done it by now if you were going to."

I reached back a hand for the syringe.

French dropped it into my palm without offering any resistance.

I twisted so we were facing each other. "Did you fake this whole thing just to get me here? You probably should have bought a gun, you know? Way quicker and less painful than this whole charade you got going on."

“He gave me one, but I lied and told him I knew how to use it when I didn’t.”

“So you thought faking a skating injury and stabbing me with a syringe full of what, saline? Was the way to go?”

French bit his lip. “It’s morphine. I swiped it from the ambulance.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m vaguely impressed. I didn’t even notice.”

“I used to shoplift. No one ever caught me.”

I scoffed. “You, golden boy, used to shoplift?”

He shook his head. “I’m no one’s golden boy.”

The kid looked so fucking pathetic I could barely stand it. “Sit down, for fuck’s sake. So if not my uncle, who? Matish or MacGregor?”

If I had to go farther down the list of people who had it out for me, I’d be here all fucking day.

“He didn’t give me his name. But I know it wasn’t your uncle ’cause he had a Scottish accent.”

“MacGregor,” I supplied for him. I cocked my head to one side. “And he’s got your sister?”

“Says he’ll sell her to the highest bidder if I don’t kill you.”

“This all happened today?”

“No. Last week. I was just told to be ready for when he told me to do it. I got the call a few hours ago, just before practice.”

“What the hell would you have done if I hadn’t gotten into the ambulance with you?”

He sighed. “I knew you would. You care about people.”

For fuck’s sake. I needed to work on my street cred ’cause apparently it was getting around that I actually did have a heart. I’d have every Tom, Dick, and Harry hunting me down, ready to take advantage of me if that got out. “I’m never being nice to anyone again,” I mumbled. “Why didn’t MacGregor just kill me himself?”

“I asked that too. He said Nyah would hate him. I still don’t understand why he would care about that though.”

Pieces fit together in my head.

The fucking underwear MacGregor had sent Nyah. The fact he’d had her sitting on his lap when we’d been at his home in Scotland. My blood ran cold. “He’s obsessed with her.”

French stared at me. “Are you going to kill me?”

I shoved to my feet. “What? No.”

“Because I’m the only decent hockey player you have?”

I stabbed at my phone, trying to get the stupid thing to call Nyah’s number. I used my shoulder to cradle it against my ear as I willed Nyah to pick up. “Because I’m not in the habit of killing someone who was just trying to help his family. I know a little too much about that. Fuck! She’s not answering.”

I lunged for the door, but French grabbed my arm. “Wait, Luca. There’s something else.”

My heart thumped, a burning need to get to Nyah aching inside me.

But something in French’s expression stopped me.

“What, French? I don’t have fucking time for this!”

He swallowed hard. “I heard crying every time he called me.” He swallowed hard. “I think he might have your baby.

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
Motherhood is hard enough without adding a Scottish psychopath.

MacGregor held a gun on me, but he didn't need to. I would have done whatever he wanted, whatever he said, as long as he let me keep my child.

I moved on wooden legs, past Bruno and Viktor lying on the driveway. MacGregor's men, men I recognized from Scotland, all came out of the woodwork, taking up the places where Luca's soldiers normally stood.

At some point during the time we'd been gone that morning, MacGregor had taken over the entire property.

I logically knew I was in shock. Could feel it in the way my body didn't quite seem connected to my brain. I clutched James like he was a life raft in a stormy sea, and didn't utter a peep when MacGregor guided me inside and locked the door behind me.

I wanted Dax and Lynx and Luca to be here. For them to see their son's face, for them to know he was okay. Every second that ticked by felt cruel, keeping that knowledge from them.

But MacGregor had taken my phone.

All I could do was hope and pray the three of them would somehow work out what was going on before they came back here and met the same fate as Bruno and Viktor.

James was the thing that kept me going. He woke up from his nap and peered up at me with sleepy, golden eyes that were so much like Dax's I wanted to cry.

"He's due a bottle, lass. He eats like a wee warrior," MacGregor told me with the pride of a father.

I stared at him, at his insane delusions, but knew I had to just go along with whatever he wanted. Not rock the boat. Not poke the bear.

I wasn't some badass fighter, nor did I want to be one. I was a normal woman. One who'd fallen in love, had a baby, and just wanted to live a quiet life raising him with the men I loved.

I wanted nothing to do with Mafia wars, with killing, with men who owned and sold women for entertainment.

I wanted nothing to do with MacGregor, even if he had brought my baby back to me.

I had no formula in the house, but I'd been pumping milk the entire time we'd been separated. I had no idea how to breastfeed, and now didn't feel like the time to learn, but I had a freezer full of little milk packages I'd carefully labelled and stored, imagining that there would be a day I got to give them to my baby.

"Do you have a bottle for him?" I asked MacGregor, hating I didn't have everything I needed for him right here. Some part of me had known I might never hold him in my arms again, and shopping for baby items just felt cruel when he wasn't here.

But now I regretted all of it.

Hated that MacGregor was the one handing me a bottle when it should have been Dax or Lynx or Luca.

James cried while I defrosted the milk, and MacGregor offered to take him, but I wouldn't let him touch him.

MacGregor shrugged and walked out of the kitchen. "Suit yourself."

He might have been decent enough to let me hold James. But I hadn't missed that he still had a gun in hand, or that his eyes flickered around the place, like he was just searching for an excuse to use it.

The day wore on, one part of me happier than I'd ever been because I had the missing part of my heart right here in my arms.

Another part of me was terrified, not just for me and James, but for the three men who completed our family.

All I could do was my part. And trust they would do theirs.

Without any of us getting shot.

I held James in one arm, his milk bag sitting in a shallow bowl of hot water to defrost in the way I'd read about in the baby book Lynx had bought me so long ago. I tried not to see the blood trail in the grand foyer, but it was impossible not to notice.

MacGregor barked out an order to his men to clean it up, and they found a mop from somewhere to take care of it. But it was too late for me to not see it.

Bruno's and Viktor's bodies had been removed from the driveway, and I was sure it was their blood disappearing into a bucket of dirty water.

Their bodies had to be down in the cage room.

The thought made me sick. We hadn't been friends. But their loyalty had switched instantly from Carlos to Luca, and they didn't deserve what had happened to them. Nobody deserved to be left down there, dead or alive.

The hours wore on, day turning into night, me focusing on James and keeping him quiet so we didn't draw MacGregor's attention. He moved around the mansion with his men, barking out orders, securing the place like he was a soldier at war.

I realized that's exactly what he was.

The men might have worn suits instead of camouflaged fatigues, but the intent was no different.

Guard the castle.

Keep out the enemy.

Hold prisoners.

Which was exactly what James and I were. Prisoners in a gilded cage.

I didn't panic, because that would get us nowhere.

Instead, I trusted in the men I loved. Trusted they'd find a way in and that all I had to do was keep us alive until they did.

"Your daddies are coming," I whispered to James as I changed his diaper, well away from the prying eyes and hearing of MacGregor's men. "I promise, by now, they'll know and they'll be working out a way for us to be together."

James smiled at me, and my heart swelled.

It was the first time he'd done that all day, and it felt like a sign that what I'd promised him was right.

But the night dragged on, and exhaustion hit me like a truck. James got fussy, despite being clean and fed, and I decided he needed to walk around in the fresh air.

MacGregor stopped me at the door. "Where are you going, lass?"

I forced myself to look him in the eye. "He needs to sleep. I thought I'd walk around with him for a bit."

"Not out there, ye won't."

I ground my teeth. "We need some fresh air. We've been cooped up in the house all day."

"Then open a window." He raised his gaze to the balcony coming off Luca's bedroom. "Or go out there, if you must. Stay out of the way."

I bit my tongue and tried not to piss him off any further. That wouldn't do anyone any good. "Okay."

He watched me walk away. I didn't need to see him to know it. I could feel his leery gaze on my backside with every step I took.

I sped up, something deep inside warning me to get out from under his gaze, to run up those stairs as fast as I could just so he could no longer see me.

I had one foot on the bottom stair when he called my name.

"Nyah."

I turned. "Yes?"

"Get the baby to bed and be naked when I get up there. I'm going to want to have my woman before I sleep."

My first instinct was to sass him, to tell him he could go to Hell because I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole.

My second reaction was to vomit or cry.

I did neither.

I just nodded while my heart thumped and my brain frantically tried to come up with a plan.

I was right back where I'd started, waiting for a man I didn't want to claim me as his.

Only this time, I was sure I couldn't do it.

I'd resigned myself to being Carlos Guerra's bride. But that was before I had three men who loved me with everything they had.

There was no way I could lie there in the bed I'd shared with them and let another man have me.

I ran up the stairs, not wanting to be around MacGregor another second, sure any hope I had left would shrivel and die if I thought I had to lie on my back and open my legs for a man who wasn't the ones I loved.

I was breathless by the time I got to Luca's bedroom. On instinct, I went to lock it but realized there was no point. It would only piss MacGregor off, and I couldn't risk that, not when he was still walking around with a loaded gun in his hand and my son was in my arms.

James snuffled against my chest, and a tear dripped down my face because I wished I had Virginia here to help teach me how to feed him. My mother was about as maternal as a stone, so there was no point wishing for her, but Virginia had been my friend. And she was this baby's grandmother.

I stood there in Luca's bedroom, crying for her, and for the fact she'd never get to meet him.

James cried with me, and I had no idea what to do. How to get him to stop.

I had no idea how to be his mother, only that I loved him more than anything.

I stepped out onto the balcony, reminding myself of Luca's warning from the night before about the railing. I eyed the loose bolts, barely keeping it together, and shook my head at how incredibly dangerous that was. It was baffling no one had noticed until the two of them were out here.

But then, the balcony wasn't exactly big enough for much of anything other than smoking.

Or giving a hand job, as Luca and Dax had experienced last night.

I gazed out over the darkened property, rocking side to side with James in my arms. My instinct had been right. He stared at the moon and stars above us, the rustle of the breeze through the trees, and he quieted, taking it all in. Slowly, his eyelids closed, and his breathing evened out.

I dragged my gaze off him and out into the night, my stress levels picking up again. If the baby was asleep, then soon MacGregor would come in, expecting a lot more than just a hand job.

I couldn't forget the possessive way he'd held me to him when we'd been at his castle in Scotland. The way he'd gripped my hip so tightly he'd left finger mark bruises on my skin. My skin crawled at the memory.

I didn’t want his hands on me. Couldn’t imagine him lying in that bed where I’d woken up that morning, wrapped in the arms of Dax and Lynx and Luca.

But we didn’t get to choose our fates.

I turned to go back inside when something caught my eye.

Marks on a large tree opposite the balcony. Not in the Guerra yard, but beyond it, in a neighboring one.

Two red painted claw marks that were just like Lynx’s killer mark.

My heart skipped a beat.

I knew for a fact they hadn’t been there the night before. We’d had sex while I was standing right here in the doorway. I would have noticed. I was sure they hadn’t even been there earlier that afternoon when I’d been up here changing James’s diaper. I remembered looking out the door, wanting to check the grounds from the higher vantage point. But nothing had been out of the ordinary.

That hope MacGregor had all but snuffed out came rushing back.

Luca, Lynx, and Dax were on the property somewhere. I didn’t know how. I didn’t know where.

But they were here. And coming for me.

I clutched James tighter.

They were coming for us.

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
MacGregor thought he had me cornered. He underestimated how desperate a mother can be.

I didn't dare put the baby down, even though he slept peacefully. I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting with bated breath for the bedroom door to open and Lynx or Dax or Luca to walk through it and tell me we were getting out of here.

When the door creaked, my heart leapt, and I pushed to my feet.

MacGregor grinned. "So eager. I like that." His gaze flickered over me, then over James, still in my arms. "I made a request of ye, lass. You haven't obeyed it."

I knew what he was talking about. He'd told me to be naked and ready for him when he came upstairs, and I definitely wasn't either of those things.

"The baby has only just gone to sleep," I murmured in a hushed tone so as to not wake him.

MacGregor walked farther into the room, inspecting it, taking in the two king-size beds we'd moved in here when all four of us had stopped sleeping apart.

“This is Guerra’s bedroom?”

I didn’t see how it hurt to confirm that. “Luca Guerra, yes.”

He nodded. “Good. I like the idea of fucking ye right here in his sheets.”

I didn’t say anything.

MacGregor apparently didn’t need me to. “Put the baby down.”

I didn’t want to, but I already knew he wasn’t going to give me a choice. I was terrified if I didn’t, if I argued, that he might hurt James to force my obedience.

I put the baby down on a blanket in the center of the bed closest to the door. He didn’t make a sound.

MacGregor smiled. “Sleeps like the dead, that one. We won’t hear from him ’til the mornin’. Sleeps through thunderstorms and engines revving. Not gunshots, but it would be pretty difficult for anyone to sleep through one of those at close range.”

I hated that my child knew that sound. That in such a small amount of time, he already knew murder and violence.

He should have only known fairy tales and my voice singing him to sleep.

MacGregor hadn’t put down that gun.

Something inside me whispered I needed him to. That I needed to do my part in all of this. That I had to get him to put that gun down so I could pick it up.

James would have to hear another gunshot, but I prayed it would be his last.

If I could kill MacGregor, it would leave his men rudderless. It would give Luca, Dax, Lynx, and whoever they’d brought with them a fighting chance.

“Take your clothes off, Nyah. Slow. Like ye would for them.”

My skin crawled. Disgust and hate for this man engulfed every inch of me.

Sweat beaded across his forehead.

I stalled, not knowing what else to do. “Let me open the balcony door for you first. Let the breeze in. You seem hot.” I moved before he could say not to, turning my back on him and crossing the room to the balcony door and flinging it wide open. There was indeed a breeze coming from outside, and it cooled my heated skin, even if I didn’t care what it did to MacGregor.

I stared out into the darkness, seeing nothing that looked like a rescue party but praying they were out there somewhere, watching me.

If they knew where I was in the house, that would be a start.

MacGregor moved in behind me, too close, his big body crowding me in from behind. He rubbed himself against me while I battled not to scream.

I twisted in his arms, trying to put some distance between us but really only succeeding in drawing him the whole way out onto the balcony with me.

He undid his pants, letting them pool at his feet, no care given over who could see us up here. His dick flopped from his underwear, and he took it in his hand, stroking himself until he was hard.

James stirred inside, and I moved to pass MacGregor to get to him, but he wouldn't let me, his big body blocking the doorway. "No, lass. Ye leave the bairn. You're busy. Get on your knees and show your man how you suck his dick."

I would have preferred to chop my own tongue off.

"Put the gun down first," I said quietly. "Please."

I could practically hear Luca's instructions in my head. Telling me I needed to get MacGregor away from his weapon.

I was so damn scared they were going to see what MacGregor was doing with his dick in his hand. I was terrified they were going to lose their cool over the thought of him raping me. Whatever plan they had would go to shit, and they'd burst in here, ready to save me, only to get shot.

I needed that fucking gun.

I needed to kill MacGregor before any of them could be hurt.

MacGregor cocked his head to one side. "Ye don't like my gun, lass? Would fit real nice up in your pussy. I'd like that, watching ye ride it. Watching the barrel disappear into that sweet cunt I've been dreaming about for months."

"It scares me," I told him, trying to make myself seem as small and weak and as innocent as I could.

He looked at it. "It's not that big. Ye could take it."

I fought the rising frustration that he wasn't complying in the way I wanted him to. I held out my hand toward it. "Then let me have it. You want to watch me ride your gun, give it to me and let me show you how good I can be."

He groaned and stroked himself hard. “Nae, lass. I want to be the one to do it. The gun stays in my hand. Always. Even when I’m fucking.”

I ground my molars together.

From the corner of my eye, I saw movement. Three dark shadows darting across the lawn behind MacGregor’s back, and panic lit up inside me.

Because I knew where they would be headed.

For the back door. The one that led to the basement cages where they would no doubt find Viktor’s and Bruno’s bodies. From there it would be a quick jog up the stairs before they’d burst into the room.

And MacGregor would shoot.

I already knew that none of my men would, not when James was in the room. Not when I was standing right beside their target. Even Luca wasn’t a good enough shot to ensure he wouldn’t accidentally kill me in the process.

But MacGregor wouldn’t hesitate. He’d shoot blindly, and someone I loved would be hurt.

Or worse.

Panic rose inside me. A ticking clock started up that echoed in my ears, and I knew I had minutes to come up with something. Something that would keep them from doing the macho thing and rescuing the fucking princess stranded up here in her goddamn ivory tower.

A tiny yelp of pain echoed through the quiet night, and I could practically see Luca or Lynx running a knife through the spleen of the guard on the door. Could almost hear the creak of them punching in the code I doubted MacGregor had had time to figure out in order to change.

MacGregor turned his head toward the sound, and I rushed in, pressing myself against him, drawing his attention back to me instead of the three men I loved who were desperately trying to get to me, no matter what it cost them.

I’d already lost them all once. I wasn’t doing that again.

“Kiss me.” I stared up at the big Scot.

He blinked, clearly surprised by the loud demand that I only prayed would cover up whatever noise the guys were making trying to get in.

“Kiss me,” I demanded again, brushing his hand aside and taking over the pumping of his dick.

I hated touching him, but it was better than him touching me. I worked his cock, moving my hand up and down his shaft, quickening my

movements, trying to get bigger and bigger reactions out of him so he didn't notice what was going on behind him.

I reached a hand up to the back of his neck and drew his face down to meet mine. I pressed my lips on his, hating the sound of his surprised chuckle when he told me he always knew I was a wildcat in the sack.

I didn't want to hear it. Hated the sound of his voice. Hated the feel of his body, of his cock.

But I kissed him anyway, shoving my tongue into his mouth, hating how he tasted. I moaned as loud as I could. I threw myself at him with such ferocity, praying he didn't notice anything else, that he stumbled back a step, tripping on his own pants, his bare ass hitting the broken railing Luca had warned us about last night.

It creaked beneath his weight.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs.

MacGregor dragged his mouth away from mine and shouted, suddenly aware we were about to be ambushed.

The gun still in his hand.

All I could see in my head was him shooting it through that bedroom where my child slept, and three men I loved stood on the other side of the door.

It opened.

And I made a split-second decision while MacGregor took aim.

I threw all my weight at him.

The sound of the balcony cracking splintered through the night air.

MacGregor's expression went from one of pure determination to one of shock as it gave way beneath his weight, and the big man windmilled his arms.

I watched in horror as he started to fall, knowing this was all my fault.

"Nyah, no!"

I didn't even know which one of them shouted my name.

Because in the next second, MacGregor's flailing, clutching, trying-to-save-himself hands caught my arm.

And I went over the edge with him, while the men I loved screamed my name, and my baby proved he actually couldn't sleep through anything.

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DAX

EARLIER THAT DAY…

Dear Diary,
Next time someone says, "I've got a plan," I'm asking a lot more questions.

Getting the phone call from Luca that MacGregor had taken over the Guerra mansion ruined any pleasure I might have secretly taken in tattooing claw marks all over the back of the man who'd held Lynx in a jail cell without charges.

Standing outside the house I'd come to think of as our home, in the darkness, watching unfamiliar guards prowl the grounds while my woman and my child were held inside was even worse.

I paced the length of the neighbor's backyard, praying Luca was right when he'd said it would be the perfect place to infiltrate from because they always went to Spain for the winter and wouldn't be home. We'd raided it for weapons, finding none, and so far, no one seemed to have called the cops to report us trespassing on their property.

But we were on the wrong side of the fence line.

"What exactly is the plan here?" I asked, staring at the other two, feeling utterly sick to my stomach.

Luca folded his arms over his chest and contemplated the building he'd called home for most of his life. "I have no fucking idea. It's a really unfortunate time for half of the Slayers to be on the other side of the country."

He glared at Lynx like that was somehow his fault.

Lynx threw up his hands. "I'm pretty sure War didn't deliberately plan the annual meetup to coincide with our problems."

War had left only a skeleton crew of prospects behind to keep an eye on the clubhouse and keep their legitimate businesses running, which was the only reason Lynx was even here right now. Otherwise, he would have been expected to go along too.

I was grateful he hadn't gone.

We needed him here tonight. I would have lost it if this had all fallen on the shoulders of me and Luca.

Especially after what had happened between us the night before, which made being around him today a little awkward.

But that had been forgotten when we'd realized Nyah was trapped inside that house with a man who had clearly been obsessed with her for a very long time.

Lynx looked at me. "We could call your brothers."

"Into a situation where they could be killed? After my father already lost his wife? Absolutely not."

Lynx screwed up his face. "Maybe some guys on the hockey team…"

Luca glanced at him. "I don't think we really have that sort of relationship with them, do you? I'm really not sure which one I would call just to say, 'Hey, we've got a bit of a hostage situation going on here that will probably end in a bloodbath. Want to come help?'"

I didn't know any of them well, but even I knew that brawling on the ice was not the same thing as what we were doing here.

"We're overthinking it," Luca announced. "We just go in, guns blazing, and kill them all."

Lynx stared at him. "The three of us, against all of them? Do you have an automatic weapon built into your bra? Because that's the only way that scenario ends up without the three of us dead."

Luca scowled at him.

The man wasn't used to not having an army to do his bidding. And right now, his army was all miles away, searching for our baby. Those close

enough to help were most likely dead.

We'd seen no sign of Viktor or Bruno or any of the other guys who'd worked security at the mansion.

But we had seen the patches on the driveway that hadn't been there that morning. Even though it was dark, I was pretty confident they weren't oil.

"I hate that she's in there with no idea whether we're even alive to come save her," I mumbled. "This is fucking killing me."

Lynx stared up at the house for a second. The lower level was blocked by the fence and the thick line of trees that bordered the property. But we had a direct view of the balcony off Luca's bedroom, and the moon was bright enough it was well illuminated.

My face heated at the memory of what Luca and I had done out there the night before.

Everyone in the neighborhood could see.

I still didn't regret it. I'd liked it too much for that.

Fuck, this whole thing was so messed up. I just wanted to go back to last night, to the four of us in that bed.

But if James was inside…

My heart squeezed again, and that sense of urgency to get in there reared up so hot and painful I knew it was only a matter of time before I gave up on being tactical and just walked out into the open, demanding MacGregor give me back my family.

I couldn't bear the thought of her standing inside that house, scared we weren't here.

I leaned back on the tree behind me, realizing it was just as lit up by the moon as that balcony was. And that if I could see them, then they could probably see me.

It was dangerous for me to just stand here in the open. But…

I spun on my heel, walking away through the darkness to my car that we'd parked a few houses down the street. I pretended I didn't hear Lynx and Luca hissing for me to come back, and questions of where I was going.

I returned a minute later with a spray can of paint.

The other two stared at me.

Lynx raised an eyebrow. "That your weapon of choice? Going to paint the town pink?"

I shook the can, wincing at the ball rattling around and the fierce look Luca sent my way.

I ignored him. “She needs to know we’re here.”

He blew out a long breath. “So, what are you going to do? Paint a sign that says, Nyah! Don’t stress! We got your back! And hold it up ’til she comes to the window and notices?”

Lynx was less sarcastic and more gentle with his feedback. “Might be a bit obvious. If Nyah can see it, they’ll all be able to see it. Where did you get that spray paint anyway?”

“I’m an artist. I’ve always got paint, and I’m planning a new mural on the side of the shop.” I waved off their questions and racked my brain, trying to get us back on track. “A symbol then. Something she’ll know is from us.”

Luca wasn’t impressed. “I’m still in favor of going in guns blazing.”

Lynx glared at him. “We are not doing that.” He turned to me. “Draw my lynx claws on the tree.”

“MacGregor’s men all know you’re the Lynx Killer,” Luca warned. “They were all there that night you lost your shit in Scotland.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” he said dryly.

“It’s not perfect, but it’s the best we’ve got. And that night in Scotland was months ago. They might not remember.” I uncapped the can and, for the second time that day, drew the marks of a serial killer, but this time onto the bark of an aging oak tree with paint.

I just hoped it was light enough for Nyah to notice them.

And that all of MacGregor’s men were busy patrolling the ground level instead of the upper levels from where they would actually see my latest artwork.

But I knew we had to move fast. Someone would work it out eventually, and when they did, we’d be sitting ducks if we didn’t have a plan.

“I think our only real option is to go in quietly and try to get them out the same way,” Lynx said. “We wait a few hours, give her as much time as we can to see the marks Dax painted so she knows to be ready. Then we go in through that back door that leads into the cells. We take out only the men we have to. There’s no way MacGregor could have all his guys here. He’s gotta be running on just enough manpower to hold his position. We stay quiet. No guns.”

Luca raised an eyebrow. “Should I use Dax’s spray paint to squirt them in the eye then? What the fuck am I supposed to do without a gun?”

Lynx looked at me. “Warm up your swinging arm. You’ve got the best punch out of the three of us.”

I gaped at them. “This is the plan? I knock out whoever we come across?”

Lynx shrugged. “It’s that or we try to strangle people with a shoelace. I don’t have time to try to make a prison shiv.”

Luca groaned quietly. “Your prison weapons suck, Lynx!”

“I don’t see you offering up any other solutions…fuck.” He grabbed both our arms, dragging us back a step. “Look. She’s on the balcony.”

I stared up at her in the doorway, so fucking beautiful I could cry. There was no sign of the baby, but a breeze ruffled her long hair, lifting loose tendrils off her shoulders.

Then someone stepped in behind her.

So close I just knew he was touching her.

MacGregor.

No one needed to say it. We all saw it and knew what it meant.

The time for plans was over.

We moved in unison to the fence, the three of us climbing it easily and dropping down on the Guerra side of the property. The thick trees covered us, and we moved quietly amongst them to the edge where the lawn opened out into long expanses of bare grass that would provide us no cover at all.

I couldn’t see anyone but MacGregor up on the balcony with Nyah, but there was no doubt in my mind that once we rounded the corner of the building, there’d be one of his men posted on the door.

If he saw us and raised the alarm, there could very well be a lot more than one.

But we were out of time.

All we could do was wait until MacGregor wasn’t facing in our direction.

And then run.

Nobody needed to say a word. We just did what needed to be done, sprinting across the grass, praying not to hear a bullet whistling through the air, aimed straight at my heart.

Midway, I dared to look up, and the sight of MacGregor’s hands all over Nyah had me biting down on a scream. Instead, I ran for the shadows, getting to them on fast, silent, fighter’s feet, my heart slamming against my chest even though the short run shouldn’t have had me out of breath.

There was only one guard on the small back door. One very bored guard, not facing in our direction. He sat on a low, retaining garden wall, leaning back on his hands, staring into the darkened night.

Despite the fact we'd just discussed me attempting to knock out any guard we came across, Lynx moved ahead of us. In one fast move, he yanked the guy backward off the wall.

It would have been almost comical, his legs and arms flying up as he tried to catch himself, but the thud of his head hitting the ground was sickening. Lynx was on him a second later, the expression on his face one I'd only seen one other night.

When MacGregor had forced us to fight.

"Go," he hissed at us, wrapping his hands around his victim's throat.

He'd be dead within seconds, I was sure of it, but I didn't hang around to find out. Luca punched a code into the lock and got the door open. I rushed in ahead of him.

The scent of blood in the air hit me, and I probably would have gagged if I had been a stranger to that smell. But years of fighting had made me almost immune to it.

The guard inside shouted but didn't have time to pull his gun or call anyone for backup. My fist met his jaw too hard, too fast, and in the next moment he was falling.

I was vaguely aware of Luca tossing a set of cage keys to one of his guys who'd been locked up inside, but neither of us stopped. We charged up the stairs, then up again, not caring now if we drew the attention of MacGregor's men. I couldn't stop now. I was too close and needed to get to her.

Luca ran at my side, the two of us hitting the landing at the same time, both of us sprinting down the hallway to his room.

I twisted the knob and fell through the door, catching myself on the other side, just in time to scream Nyah's name.

Just in time to hear the balcony crack.

To watch MacGregor's arms windmill for balance.

And for him to pull the woman I loved—we loved—over the edge with him.

I stood there, staring at the hole in the railing, hearing the sick thud of their bodies hitting the ground and James scream from the bed I'd slept in just last night.

My entire body locked up.

Luca pushed past me, running for the balcony, and it was only me grabbing him at the last second that stopped him from walking out there.

“Let go of me!” he shouted desperately. “Nyah!”

I wanted to scream too. It bubbled up inside me, until it was on the tip of my tongue but couldn’t quite come out. My brain blanked out in the chaos, only able to think about one thing at a time. Nyah falling. Stopping Luca from doing the same. The baby. Oh, fuck. Nyah.

I dragged Luca back from the crumbling railing. The baby screamed from his spot on the bed, and I went to him, picking him up, cradling him to my chest. Together, Luca and I ran down the stairs, meeting Lynx on the way, who didn’t even question what we were doing. I was vaguely aware of Luca’s men, the ones who’d been locked up but not injured, now storming the house, taking back what was ours.

But all I cared about was the woman lying on the ground beneath the balcony.

“Oh my fucking God,” Lynx uttered brokenly.

I stumbled forward, James screaming against my chest. “Call an ambulance!”

Luca picked up MacGregor’s gun that lay abandoned on the grass, none of us trying to be quiet anymore. He aimed at its owner, but it was pointless.

The closer we got, the more it became clear that MacGregor hadn’t survived the fall. His neck was angled all wrong, his torso twisted unnaturally.

Nyah lay to one side of him, her leg and arm so badly broken I caught glimpses of the white of her bone.

From a first floor on a regular house, a fall like that might not have done much damage. But on a house like this one, with high ceilings and sweeping staircases, it was more like falling from a rooftop.

Survivable for sure.

But not if you landed wrong. And neither MacGregor nor Nyah had landed well.

Luca fell at her side, picking up her head to cradle it in his lap. He slapped her face and shouted her name, begging her to be alive.

I couldn’t get a breath. Couldn’t move to help them. Just stood here, clutching my son, willing her to be okay.

Lynx dropped to the ground at her side, pressed two fingers to her neck, and tilted his head so his ear hovered over her lips. “She has a pulse and she’s breathing!” He rubbed his knuckles up and down her sternum. “Come on, Nyah. You aren’t fucking dying tonight.”

Her eyes flew open at the pain he inflicted on her, and she groaned.

I breathed again for what felt like the first time since she’d gone over the edge.

But then her face twisted in pain and she screamed, her complexion so ghostly white it was entirely unnatural.

Her breaks looked so bad. I didn’t even know who had called emergency services, but sirens wailed in the distance, all of them too far away for my liking when she was torn up with pain.

“James!” she screamed through gritted teeth.

My knees hit the ground beside her. “I’ve got him, pretty girl. I’ve got him. He’s right here.”

I brought him close to her face, pressed his chubby cheek against her much-too-white one.

They both quieted instantly. She reached her good arm, the one that wasn’t clearly broken, up to stroke the baby’s face. She went straight into mom mode, despite the pain that had to be racking her body. She spoke soothing words to the frightened baby, her voice calm and reassuring, full of love for the tiny child I held for her.

When his cries became nothing more than snuffles and his stressed-out little body relaxed back into sleep, Nyah stared up at the three of us, hovering over her.

“He’s truly home?”

I nodded, smoothing back her sweaty hair from her forehead. “He’s home, and you’re going to be okay,” I promised her. “We’re all going to be okay.”

But I really had no idea if it was true.

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
Blood doesn't make a family. Kara proved that today.

"Hospitals are my new least favorite place," Luca complained.

Dax looked over at him. "Is it the food or because someone tried to kill you last time you were in one?"

He grimaced. "They're the same thing, aren't they? The food here is terrible."

It really was. I'd only been here forty-eight hours and I was already over the slop they served. But I was lucky enough to have three men who had barely left my side, except to go and get me takeout. "I can't believe French did that."

Luca shook his head. "He was desperate."

"He should have gone to the cops. Or come to us," Lynx muttered, anger in his tone.

Lara, French's sister, had been one of the people MacGregor had dragged down to the cages beneath the house after he'd taken over. She'd been let out, along with Luca's guys, and I'd still been on the scene, the paramedics trying to stabilize me enough to move me into the ambulance when French had shown up, Lara running into his arms.

I'd thought I was hallucinating the entire thing, which definitely could have been possible with the amount of pain meds I'd had by that point, but the pieces had all fit together in my head two days later when Luca had filled us all in on exactly how he'd realized MacGregor was back in town.

"Bruno and Viktor both send their love," Luca said to me.

I raised an eyebrow, which was one of the few areas of my body that didn't require heavy painkillers. "They send love?"

He shrugged. "That's literally what Bruno said. Word for word. I don't know, maybe getting shot and nearly dying changed him for the better."

I didn't care whether Bruno and Viktor started writing poetry or volunteering their time to bathe the homeless. All I cared about was they were alive. I'd been so sure they were dead, but both had been dragged out of the cages and rushed into surgery and were now recuperating in the ICU, with Luca only getting in to visit because he'd lied and said he was their brother.

If they decided to come back to the house, we'd take care of them.

Somewhere along the way, I'd come to care for them, and they didn't know how much I appreciated the fact they'd both taken a bullet for me. They'd wave it off and tell me it was their job, but they'd nearly died and I wouldn't forget that.

I'd somehow managed to score a private hospital room, maybe because I had so many visitors, between the guys, Violet and Amber, and the rest of the Slayers who had pretty much all traipsed in one by one over the last two days as they'd returned from their biker meetup. They'd ruffled my hair like they were my older brothers and affectionately told me they were glad I wasn't dead.

I don't know if they realized exactly how much that meant to me. Especially because not one of my brothers or my mother had bothered to make the drive to see if I was okay, or to meet their nephew and grandson. I knew they would have heard through the grapevine. What had happened with MacGregor was not only spreading through Luca's social circles like wildfire, it was all over the news.

Reporters ambushed the guys every time they left the hospital or the house, wanting to know every detail from who MacGregor was to us, why him and I had been up on that bedroom balcony in the first place, and how our baby had been returned.

Luca, bossy as always, had instructed everyone not to say anything, other than we'd hold a press conference when I was out of the hospital.

I wasn't particularly looking forward to that, but people deserved closure. I could see that on the faces of the nurses who came in and out to care for me. When they'd seen James in my arms and realized he was *that* baby from the news, one had cried in relief. So much so Dax had pulled her into a hug that I watched with tears in my own eyes. She'd gone red in the cheeks and stepped away, apologizing for being so unprofessional. But that she was a mother, with a baby of a similar age, and she just couldn't imagine how I'd even functioned without him in my arms.

I didn't know either. I hated I couldn't do much for him with my arm in a sling and my leg in a cast, but that hadn't stopped me from holding him with my good arm and enjoying hours and hours of snuggles. In a very uncharacteristic move of the hospital, they'd allowed James and one of the guys to stay with me each night, a bassinet and a rollaway cot being delivered to my room.

I suspected Luca had been greasing the wheels a bit there. But I was too busy learning everything there was to learn about my baby. I would always mourn the months I'd lost with him. I'd never have tiny baby photos, and that hurt my heart. But I would have photos. From chubby baby to toddler then small boy. I'd get teenage scowls and grown-up, successful-man photos of him.

We already had four phones overflowing with images of him and a group chat to share them with each other. And we'd only had him a few days.

I kissed James's soft head and breathed in his perfect baby smell, silently thanking the universe for bringing him home.

Someone knocked on the door, and my perfect little baby world imploded in on itself when two cops stood in the doorway.

I'd been waiting for this.

The guys had all assured me it would be fine, but how could it be?

I'd pushed a man over a balcony, and he'd died.

That was murder.

I clutched James tighter, a sick feeling swirling in my stomach at the thought of being separated from him again. Dax and Luca and Lynx would at least have him to love, but I was sure I would die from being away from him if I was sent to prison.

“Officers,” Lynx said, focusing on the older one in particular. “I hope you’ve come with good news?”

The older man diverted his gaze from Lynx’s, training it on me. A weird tension filled the room, and I was sure it wasn’t just because of my nerves.

The officer seemed distinctly nervous too. He fought to keep his gaze from straying to Lynx, and then Dax, but he fidgeted, his eyes flicking back and forth.

I frowned. “Do you three know each other?”

The officer shook his head fast.

But Dax nodded at the same time. “I did a giant back piece for him recently.”

It all clicked together.

This was the officer who’d kept Lynx without charges and had handed him over to my father.

The same officer Dax and Lynx had tortured with a giant tattoo a few days before, as a reminder to keep the cops away from Lynx.

Part of me wanted to jump up and claw the man’s eyes out for his part in everything that had happened.

Part of me just desperately wanted all of this to be over. “Are you here to arrest me?”

If Lynx had glared any harder at the officer, I was sure laser beams would have shot out of his eyes.

The officer answered fast. “No, we just came to tell you we won’t be pressing charges.”

Luca snorted softly beneath his breath. “Wow. How about that?”

I didn’t miss Dax delivering a sharp kick to Luca’s shin.

The officer continued anyway, “The reports on the balcony confirm your story, Miss Matish. There was clearly a weak point in the railing because there’s no way Mr. MacGregor’s weight could have broken it if there hadn’t been.”

“I told you, my father was slack with maintenance,” Luca said dryly.

The officer didn’t look at him.

I was pretty sure he was scared to.

“Furthermore, we spoke to the other men who were injured, and they told us it was MacGregor who shot them. The gunshot residue on his hands indicates that to be true. The woman held captive has confirmed she was taken from her dorm room and held against her will, but again, she

identified a known associate of MacGregor's to be her assailant. We have him in custody."

Luca folded his arms across his chest. "If that's all, I think Nyah could use some rest."

The officer agreed quickly and stepped back, not daring to even peep in Lynx's or Dax's directions. He and his partner scuttled out of the room.

I raised an eyebrow at the three men left behind. "That was a very different man from the arrogant asshole he was last time I saw him."

"He's lucky I let him breathe," Luca said beneath his breath. "He's a corrupt piece of shit."

Lynx leaned over and put his hand to the back of Luca's neck, squeezing the muscles there reassuringly. "He serves a purpose. Those marks on his back guarantee he'll keep the cops off our backs."

"Who has cops on their backs?" Isabella asked from the doorway, her arms full of flowers. She winked at her brother. "You have a new boyfriend? Don't you have enough of that going on with just Lynx?"

"And Dax," Lynx muttered, hiding a laugh.

This time it was Lynx who copped a kick in the shin from Dax.

Kara, who'd come in behind Isabella, hid a smile.

Isabella didn't notice the three of them, she was too busy thrusting flowers in my direction and then reaching for her nephew.

I laughed and gave up the baby, swapping him for the flowers. "You have brought flowers every day since I've been in here!"

She smiled into James's chubby-cheeked face. "I know, but it's an excuse to come see this beautiful boy. Ugh, he's so cute I want to eat him."

"Please don't," Luca said. "We only just got him back."

Isabella shot her brother a dirty look, but he stood, giving up his seat for her so she could sit nearest to me.

Kara smiled at him over Isabella's shoulder, then at me. "He is so perfect, Nyah. He's making my ovaries hurt."

I grinned at her. "You could have another…you've got an awful lot of girls over in that house of yours. Maybe time to try for a boy?"

Isabella dragged her attention off the baby and stared up at Kara. "Oh my God, yes, can you, please? Jax and I will help all the time, I swear." Her face faltered. "Oh. Though if you have another baby you might need me to move out, wouldn't you? That's a lot of people to have in one house."

Kara frowned at her, her voice instantly turning scolding. “Isabella Guerra, do you really think I’m that sort of person? What exactly has given you that idea?”

Isabella’s cheeks turned pink. “I’m not blood.”

Kara scoffed, “What has blood got to do with it?” She shifted to the side of the seat and squatted so she and Issy were eye height. “You not being our blood doesn’t change how much we love you. It doesn’t change that you became Jax and Wren and Hayley Jade’s big sister the day you moved in. You picked up that role like it was always meant to be yours.”

Isabella swallowed thickly. “You don’t need another daughter though.”

“Don’t need one,” Kara agreed. “We just want one.” She glanced over at Luca. “If that’s okay with you, of course. Hawk, Hayden, Grayson, and I already discussed it and were going to talk to you when everything settled down. But when is everything ever completely settled in this town? So I guess now is as good a time as any.” She sucked in a deep breath, suddenly seeming very nervous. “We would like to legally adopt Isabella.”

Isabella’s mouth dropped open. “What? But I’m already seventeen.”

“So what? Being seventeen means you don’t need a mother?” Kara shook her head sadly. “It doesn’t matter what age you are. We all need a mother.”

My heart ached, because both Kara and I knew the pain of not having one in our lives.

Luca knew it too.

For half a second, I thought he might say no. That he wanted Isabella to come and stay with us, for us to be her parents.

I would have agreed in a heartbeat.

But something in my gut told me Isabella was already exactly where she needed and wanted to be.

Luca’s voice clogged with emotion. “As long as I always get to be your big brother, if you want Kara and Grayson and Hawk and Hayden to be your parents, then I can’t think of anyone better for the job.”

Isabella’s tears spilled over her cheeks and dropped onto James’s head. She laughed, brushing them off him, while she nodded at Kara. “Yes. Please. I would like that very much.”

Kara lost her hold on her tears too, and she hugged her newest daughter close. James let out a muffled squeak of protest when he was squished between the two women.

They both backed off, Isabella apologizing to him profusely, but he went straight back to happily sucking on his pacifier and making loving eyes at his aunt.

Luca blinked a few times, trying to get himself under control. “Kara, I just… I know apologies for what my family did will never be enough—”

She held her hand up. “We’ve been through this. I don’t want to keep rehashing it. What I want is for Isabella and Nyah and James to be safe.”

He agreed quickly. “That’s all I want too.”

“Then we want the same things. But talk is cheap, Luca. I think you know that.”

Part of me wanted to defend him.

Part of me knew the man he’d once been didn’t deserve defending.

But Kara and I, we both saw the same thing when we looked at Luca.

A man who’d changed for the better. Who’d picked his family over everything else.

Who just wanted a second chance to be the person he was always supposed to be. One who loved and was loved in return. A father with a child of his own now and partners to keep safe.

He took a deep breath to steady himself but then gazed around at those of us in the room. “This feels like the right time to bring up where we go from here. Or more specifically, Issy, what we do with the Guerra money.”

She didn’t even take a second to think it over. “I don’t want any of it.”

Luca nodded. “That was my initial reaction too, but Is, it’s not that simple.”

“Burn the money, I don’t care.” There was a fire in Isabella’s eyes that stemmed from her deep-rooted hate of her father and the world he’d dragged them all into.

But it was Kara who put a hand on Isabella’s arm and rubbed it. “Who does that help?”

Isabella blew out a long, sharp breath of air. “I don’t know.”

Kara nodded, squeezed her arm, and turned to Luca. “What’s the plan?”

He glanced at me, then Lynx, and Dax. “I’m sorry, I haven’t even spoken to any of you about this yet. But I want the money to go directly back to the people we most affected.” I was sure he was remembering that so much of Kara’s heartache had been caused by the trafficking his father had been involved in. “I want to open a women and children’s center. In Saint View. I’ll fund the entire thing, but…”

I swallowed hard, already knowing exactly what he was going to say. “But you can’t be involved in running it.”

He nodded. “That doesn’t feel right. It feels like it should be run by women.” He looked at me and Kara and Isabella. “And I can’t think of three women more capable than all of you. If you want to, that is.”

I didn’t even need a second to think about it. “I want to.”

“I do too,” Isabella said, almost as fast.

Kara’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I see so many women and children in need of help at the hospital. And there’s so few resources here.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it. “You already have so many responsibilities. You don’t need to take on another.”

She squeezed my fingers back. “But I want to. A center like that should have a nurse available.”

“We’ll hire whoever you need, so you can all be as involved as you want without running yourselves into the ground.” Luca stared at each of us in turn. “I just want this to be what is *actually* needed, not what some man in a suit *thinks* is needed. I want to listen and to learn. I want to help.”

I wanted to hug him, but I couldn’t reach him from my spot in my bed. Though he seemed like he desperately needed it, he didn’t move. I knew he wouldn’t, because he didn’t feel like he deserved affection or forgiveness when it came to this topic.

Maybe he’d spend the rest of his life trying to make up for it.

And maybe that was okay. Maybe that was exactly what this community needed, someone to take responsibility and do the things that made it better.

A kernel of excitement lit up inside me. I’d never had a direction in life. Never had a passion. I’d always known that eventually I’d be sold off to marry one of my father’s friends to become his trophy wife, so what was the point in having ambition?

But everything had changed.

And I wanted so badly to do a good job at this.

Dax stood and kissed the top of my head, murmuring that I would be amazing.

It was only then I realized I’d said the words out loud.

My cheeks went pink with embarrassment, but Kara and Isabella both had the same kind of determination and excitement in their expressions.

I grinned. “Someone get me a notepad and a pen. We have some brainstorming to do.”

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DAX

Dear Diary,
One generation destroyed this family. Maybe ours can rebuild it.

The sun sank outside the hospital windows, and visitors all drifted away. All but our family of five and Isabella, who had reluctantly given up the baby to Nyah to feed, but now scribbled note after note onto a pad of paper, recording all the ideas the two of them had for the women and children's center.

"It really needs a better name," Isabella said thoughtfully, staring down at her notes. "The Saint View Women and Children's Center is a mouthful."

Nyah glanced over at me. "We could call it Virginia's Place."

I swallowed hard. "For real?"

Nyah nodded.

I blew out a long breath. "She'd tell you it's too much. You should name it after Isabella or Kara or one of the other women…"

Isabella shook her head. "Your mom was the closest thing I had to a mother until Kara. I don't really remember my own, Luca does, but I was too young when she died. All I knew about warmth and love came from Virginia. That's what women will want to feel when they come to our place.

Cared for and seen. And besides that, I certainly don't want the Guerra name anywhere on it."

Isabella had seen and experienced way too much to ever truly sound like a teenager. I hated that for her and prayed that when James got to be her age, all he knew was sports and friends and fun, and that the darkness of this world Isabella and Luca and Nyah had grown up in hadn't touched him.

There had already been a lot of tears shed today, and I didn't want to set Nyah or Isabella off again, so I bit back my own emotions. "All the decisions that need to be made for the center need to come from the two of you. If you want to call it Virginia's Place, then my family and I are honored."

Isabella wrote it down in big blocky letters on her notepad, her mouth turned up in a smile. "It's perfect."

Nyah hummed softly. James, with help from a lactation specialist who worked at the hospital, was latched at her breast and sucking down his dinner like he'd been waiting all his life for it.

She leaned back against the starched white pillows. "We're going to help so many people. Not just trafficked women. Women in abusive relationships. Women who need financial or educational support. We can run learning programs, provide free, hot meals…"

"That would have meant a lot to me when I was young," a voice said quietly from the doorway.

Constance, Nyah's mother, stood there, a small blue teddy bear clutched in her fingers.

Nyah stiffened, the joy on her face evaporating. "What are you doing here?"

Constance's long, flowy dress, expensive jewelry, and perfectly done hair were so out of place amongst the bleak hospital walls and the hoodies and jeans the rest of us wore. She took a step into the room and slowly, almost as if she was waiting for Nyah to tell her no, moved to the side of the bed.

Nyah's gaze met mine.

I knew I didn't have to ask her out loud if she wanted her mother here. She could see the question in my expression, and I could read hers just as easily.

She hadn't been expecting it, but she wanted this.

I settled back in my chair a little, still on edge and ready to stand up and intervene if that's what Nyah wanted me to do.

But I could see the tremble in her bottom lip. The burning in her eyes that said she had things to say to the woman who'd birthed her.

But that also, maybe, she was just glad to have her here.

Constance didn't deserve a second chance with her daughter, but I couldn't blame Nyah for considering it. She'd watched her father die. Her brothers were no doubt walking in his footsteps and stepping in to take over his business. And she had a brand-new baby.

It was understandable, even after everything, Nyah might want her mom around.

James, done with his meal, closed his eyes. Nyah moved him from her breast carefully, tucking a pacifier into his mouth when he grumbled a little.

She looked up at her mom. "Do you want to hold him?"

Constance seemed shocked that Nyah would offer.

She nodded quickly. "I very much would."

She put the teddy bear down on the edge of Nyah's bed and lifted the baby from her arms.

Part of me wanted to cross the room and snatch him back. But that feeling wasn't just about Constance. I felt like that any time anyone other than the four of us touched him. It was something I needed to get over but was probably going to take months of therapy.

Instead, I shifted to sit beside Nyah on her bed, putting my arm around her and squeezing her reassuringly because I knew having her mother here had to be confusing and emotional for her.

Constance stared down at her grandson. "He's so beautiful, Nyah. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

She glanced around the room, at Lynx and Luca sitting in uncomfortable chairs at the foot of the bed, and at Isabella watching Constance warily from the seat nearest the window. Then finally back at me and Nyah.

She handed the baby back to us. "I owe the two of you an apology. For the role I played in keeping you apart. I can see now how big a mistake that was."

Luca muttered something I suspected wasn't very generous or forgiving.

Lynx kicked him in the shin to shut him up.

I cradled my son in my arms, his mother's skin warming my other side.

All I could feel was content.

This was all I'd ever wanted. The two of them.

Though Luca and Lynx rounding out our chosen family was a nice bonus.

But forgiveness wasn't mine to offer. It was Nyah's.

She touched her finger to James's palm and watched his tiny hand close around it. "How could you?" she asked her mom, a touch of bitterness creeping into her tone. "You nearly cost me all of this."

It wasn't entirely fair. The things Enzo had done weren't Constance's fault. But at the end of the day, hers and Jeremiah's decision to sell Nyah to Carlos was what had set all of this off in the first place.

Constance tried to school her expression into something neutral, but she couldn't. The sadness and hurt was there all over her face. "The only excuse I have was that I'd already walked that path. I'd been sold to your father, mine not caring or asking my opinion on the matter because I was fifteen years old and just a girl whose wants and needs didn't matter. It was what happened to all the girls in my circle. My friends. My cousins. None of us liked it, but we'd been brought up not to complain. To just do our hair nicely, wear makeup, stay pretty so our husbands didn't look elsewhere."

Nyah's expression matched her bitter tone. "And instead of wanting more for your daughter, you thought pushing her down the same road was a good idea?"

Constance's shoulders slumped and she sighed heavily. "No. I never thought that, but I also had no power to stop it. And filling your head with ideas that you could just seemed foolish. It was a recipe for more hurt. I don't expect you to believe me, but everything I did, I really did think it was for the best. Carlos was such a lucrative match for you. He was even handsome. The other men making offers to your father were in much lower standing, not as rich, not as handsome."

Nyah sighed. "Mom…"

Constance held out her hand. "I know. It doesn't make a difference. I should have tried harder. Fought with your father more…"

Nyah shook her head. "We both know it wouldn't have made a difference."

Constance nodded. "I like the sound of your women's center. I would have run, back when I was first sold, if there had been somewhere to run to.

Or maybe I would have gone there for support after you and your brothers were born. Maybe someone would have shown me what it meant to be a good parent, and not just one who went along with everything her husband demanded." She swallowed hard. "Maybe I wouldn't have turned into a woman who tried to keep her daughter from the man she clearly loves."

Nyah squeezed my thigh, but her words were for the other woman. "The only problem with that would be I never would have met them." She nodded toward the end of the bed, where Luca and Lynx sat silently, letting the mother and daughter have the time they needed.

Nyah raised a shoulder. "And I love them too. I can't even imagine a life without them in it now. If I could, I know it wouldn't be as happy as the one I'll have with them in it."

Constance smiled through her tears at that. "I'm really glad for you. For all of you." She rubbed the baby's wispy hair. "I wish I could be here to see him grow up."

"Where are you going?" Nyah's brow furrowed, her features switching from confusion to concern. "Tell me you're not planning to hurt yourself."

"No, I—"

Nyah interrupted her. "I know that look, Mom. Because I once stood on a balcony in your house and contemplated throwing myself off it." She swallowed thickly. "It was the wrong choice for me, and it'll be the wrong choice for you too. If you need help, I'll give it to you."

Nyah reached for her hand.

Constance took it, rubbing it between her own. "No, no. I promise, it's not like that. I won't lie and say it didn't cross my mind after your father died. I don't know who I am without him, or what I'm supposed to do."

"You're supposed to make the most of a second chance," I murmured. "Have a second life. Maybe a better one."

She nodded. "I would like that. Truly, I would. But I don't deserve it. I need to take responsibility for the things I've done. And that's probably going to mean I end up in jail."

Nyah gaped at her. "For what?"

She sucked in a wobbly breath. "I killed Virginia."

I froze. Nyah froze. I was sure the entire continent iced over at Constance's confession.

Constance rushed to fill the gap, her tears rolling freely down her cheeks. "She came to our house. She knew about the baby and begged us to

call off the marriage to Carlos. She was going to ruin everything for you. She knew the baby wasn't of Guerra blood. We couldn't just let her leave and tell people. If that rumor had gotten around, Carlos would have demanded a paternity test."

I could barely speak. "So you choked her to death? That's what the coroner's report said. That she had a lot of wounds inflicted on her after her death but she'd most likely directly died of asphyxiation."

Constance looked confused. "No, I didn't… Your father was glaring at me, and I knew what he expected me to do. I hit her over the head with a paperweight. Jeremiah…" She blinked. "I don't know. I can barely remember any of it. I don't want to. But he was there. Virginia fell after I hit her. I thought I killed her. But he…he must have…"

My stomach churned at the details of my mother's death. Part of me didn't want to hear it. Wanted to scream for her to shut up and get out.

The other part needed to know. Needed the closure.

Constance bit her lip. "It doesn't matter who landed the final blow. I had a part in her death, and I can't forgive myself for it. I have to turn myself in."

Nyah pulled her hand away, a tear rolling down her cheek. "She was a good woman, Mom. How could you do that to her? And then you framed Lynx for it? How did you even know about him?"

Her mouth twisted into a grim line. "MacGregor called your father after what happened in Scotland. So we knew about what Lynx had done there. It felt like killing two birds with one stone. Lynx was another person who knew the baby's true paternity, MacGregor was sure of that after seeing the way he reacted to you in Scotland, and we needed to get rid of her body."

Lynx scrubbed a hand over his face. "I made it possible by leaving the compound. I had multiple alibis while I was inside, not to mention video proof. So you had to wait until I left." He squinted at her. "Was it you who knocked me out?"

Constance grimaced. "We waited in the woods until you left, then put Virginia's body as close to the Slayers' gates as we could, without dipping into range of the cameras. I wanted to leave. I was sure we'd done enough to frame you, but Jeremiah didn't think so. It was so late at night, and there's not much open at that time, other than a couple of places on the Strip. It wasn't hard to find your bike parked outside the all-night pharmacy. He hit you with a tire iron from the back of his car. He wasn't sure if you

were dead or not, but I managed to convince him not to go back and check because even if you weren't dead, you'd be arrested. We'd planted more than enough evidence, and Jeremiah had at least a couple of cops on the take. It wasn't hard for him to point them in your direction."

"Why spring me from the prison, then? Why not leave me there to rot?" Lynx was honestly baffled.

We all were.

Constance sighed heavily. "By that point, Jeremiah had made an agreement with MacGregor. Luca had publicly claimed the baby was his. They had realized that if Carlos and Luca were dead, the baby would be the heir."

Luca swore under his breath as he put the pieces together. "And that whoever controlled the heir, controlled the empire."

Nyah was pale. "But anyone who knew the truth about the baby was a liability." Her fingers clenched in the blanket. "So, what? His plan was to just kill or imprison all of us?"

Constance grimaced but glanced at me and Lynx and Luca. "Carlos wanted you dead, Luca. He knew it had to happen, after the way you'd disrespected him in Scotland. But I got the impression he truly did love you and he couldn't kill you himself."

Nyah rolled her eyes. "Let me guess? My ass-kissing father was more than happy to make a deal and do it for him?"

Constance nodded. "Your father was very ambitious, Nyah."

"Not very smart," Luca muttered. "But ambitious, sure."

Constance turned to him. "I don't agree with that. He had an ability to think fast. He owed both your father and MacGregor debts, and we had no money to pay for them. When you publicly announced in Scotland that the baby was yours, he realized there was a Guerra heir, one of his blood too, who could inherit. So he and MacGregor came up with a plan. Kill you, which everyone knew had to happen anyway because of the war you'd waged with your father. With you dead, all that had to happen was for Carlos to marry Nyah and legitimize the baby. He knew that with you gone, Carlos would want a new heir, and Nyah's baby, the one you had claimed was yours, was his only chance at having one. He just had to marry her to legitimize the baby. So we knew he wouldn't need convincing.

"But I know my daughter. I know she's a romantic. I didn't know if she would marry Carlos, even if she thought the three of you were dead or

imprisoned or had walked away. So I convinced Jeremiah to keep you alive just in case he needed you. If you're dead, you're dead. There's nothing to leverage."

I felt sick over all that time we'd spent in that church basement. "But if we were alive, he could torture us."

"He heard about what happened to Nyah in Carlos's cages. The branding. He knew she wouldn't want any of you to go through what she did. So he kept you alive, just long enough to make sure she did what he wanted."

Luca pinched the bridge of his nose. "We heard the guards say we were supposed to die the day of the wedding. I thought they were my father's men."

She shook her head. "They were Jeremiah's. You were all supposed to be executed the minute Nyah married Carlos. That would have legitimized the baby, and he would have officially been seen as the next Guerra heir. But then Enzo stepped in and took matters into his own hands. That was never part of MacGregor's and Jeremiah's plans. It was just the two of them, MacGregor getting Nyah and the Guerras' international holdings, while we would keep the baby and control the US. But I think Enzo had come to the same conclusion. He already thought Luca was dead, Isabella's husband would have inherited before Enzo did…"

"Unless Enzo was married to Nyah, the mother of the only remaining male Guerra bloodline," Luca said, tone flat. "Or at least, the baby everyone believed was Guerra blood. It didn't even matter that Enzo knew he wasn't. It just had to look like he was."

I stared down at the baby in my arms who had, through absolutely no fault of his own, become the center of a Mafia war. I held him a little bit tighter, all the more determined that he was never going to be a part of this world again. I didn't care where I had to move my family, or what we had to do to get away from all of this, all I knew was my child was not going to grow up with a target on his back.

"I'm just glad I got to meet the baby," Constance said softly. "You'll be a much better mother than I ever was, Nyah. I have no doubt about that. I know I never said it, but I do love you and I'm so proud of you. I hope one day you'll forgive me. Maybe you could even send me photos once in a while?"

Nyah didn’t say anything. She trembled at my side, all of us silent as we tried to process the absolute bomb Constance had dropped.

Constance tried to smile, but it didn’t quite work, her lips barely flickering. “I’m going to go now. I truly am sorry, to all of you. I hope you get the clean break you deserve.”

She was at the door before Nyah brokenly called out, her voice cracking, “Mom!”

Constance stopped and turned back.

“Of course I’ll send you photos when you’re in prison. And we’ll visit, me and James. We’ll come see you.”

Constance nodded. “I’d really like that.”

She lifted a hand in a wave and disappeared down the corridor.

Nyah couldn’t hold it together a moment longer. She burst into tears, and Lynx and Luca immediately got up off their seats, joining us on the bed to comfort her. I passed her back the baby who woke up and started fussing, and then I stepped back, needing some air, knowing Lynx and Luca would keep them both safe while I did.

I found myself out in the hallway, then in the elevator, then down on the ground floor and walking faster and faster until I was outside in the night air surrounding the parking lot.

Constance’s heels clicked along the concrete in front of me.

I choked out her name, not even sure if it was loud enough for her to stop, not even sure if I truly wanted her to.

But she turned on her heel, doing a double take when she recognized me. She glanced around the quiet parking lot, but there was no one else here but me and her.

Fear flickered in her eyes.

“Did you mean what you said back there?” I asked her. “About wanting to be a better mother? And about turning yourself in?”

Constance stared me dead in the eye. “Yes. To both.”

I bit down on my lip, not even sure how I could contemplate saying this when half of me was baying for this woman’s blood.

But the other half of me, the bigger, better half, whispered that hurting her only hurt Nyah in the end.

And that was the last thing I ever wanted to do.

“Then don’t turn yourself in.”

Constance stared at me for a moment. Then shook her head. “I have to.”

“You don’t. You get to live with your guilty conscience for the rest of your life. But despite every horrible thing you’ve done, nobody should be without a mother. My son has had to live that reality for the last few months, and so have I, but Nyah has had to live that her entire life. And she’s a good enough person that I know she would still relish a second chance with you. A do-over. A chance for you to be different. Better.” I sighed heavily. “Jeremiah already paid for my mother’s death. As he should. It was his actions that killed her in the end.”

She shook her head. “After what I did…”

“After what he made you do.”

She wiped her tears with the backs of her hands. “I’m not blameless.”

“None of us are. But all I care about is Nyah and James and that they’re happy. I don’t think they can be if they’re visiting you in jail. So don’t go. Don’t turn yourself in. Let sleeping dogs lie and be the mother and grandmother they deserve.”

Constance stepped in and put her arms around me, holding me tight in a hug I couldn’t bring myself to return, though I hoped one day, when she’d proven herself, that I would.

“I don’t deserve this, Dax.”

Maybe not, but Nyah did.

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LUCA

SIX MONTHS LATER

Dear Diary,
Babies aren't the only thing that keeps us awake at five in the morning.

James's wailing cut through the silent night like a banshee's scream.

Nyah, with her mommy superpowers, was up and halfway out of the bed before the rest of us could even react. I managed to catch her wrist as she climbed over me to go get our son.

"Nope." I pulled her back down in the bed. "I'll get him. You sleep."

Nyah frowned at me. "It's my turn. You got up with him at least three times last night."

I brushed my lips over hers and tucked her back in. "I don't care. I'd get up a hundred times a night for that little boy."

She smiled at me in the darkness. "I love you."

I grinned at her. "And I love when your tits are falling out of that top."

She shoved me off her. "You're such an asshole."

I covered her warm body with mine and kissed her again. "I love you too."

Lynx shoved me sleepily. "Yeah, yeah, love, kisses. Whatever. Go get the baby before the underworld summons him home." He burrowed his

head beneath a pillow. “This eight-month sleep regression thing is insane. Who’s that mad about sleeping? Sleeping is good!”

I chuckled and left the room to go try to remind our son of that.

While Nyah had been laid up in bed recovering from the broken bones she’d suffered in her fall off the balcony, Dax, Lynx, and I had secretly converted her old bedroom, the one next to mine, into a nursery.

None of us had wanted to paint the room blue. We’d made excuses like colors not being gender assigned, and whatnot, but I saw the looks in Dax’s and Lynx’s faces.

And I knew they mirrored mine.

We were all thinking about the babies we’d have in the future. And so a neutral color made the most sense.

We’d picked a mint green with some yellow and gray accents that had definitely been Dax’s suggestion, since neither Lynx nor I had any idea about what colors went well together. Lynx and I had rolled paint on the walls while Nyah watched old *Twilight* movies in the room next door, blissfully unaware of what we were doing.

But the best part of the room was the mural Dax had painstakingly painted, all while reminding us that cartoon animals were not exactly his usual style.

I still smiled every time I walked in there and saw the bigger, male elephants he’d painted on the wall above the crib, the three of them surrounding a smaller female, with a baby at her stumpy feet.

Our little family on the wall right there. In animal form, amongst a bunch of other animal friends that completed the mural.

I picked up James, and he instantly settled, rubbing his tired face across my chest and snuffling.

“Hey, kid. Anyone ever tell you five in the morning is a bit early for all of that?”

He just closed his eyes and accepted the pacifier I popped back in his mouth.

It didn’t matter how many times I stood in this room, holding him, I never got sick of it. It didn’t matter how tired I was, how much he cried, I just loved him like I’d never loved anyone before.

I sat in the rocking chair with him and murmured to him reassuringly, talking nonsense just because I knew my voice comforted him. “So, not much has changed since our last chat two hours ago. Lynx is still snoring.

Dax is still drooling. Your mom, well, she's perfect, but don't tell her that because she'll call me a sap. But she is. We've got an important day coming up, so it might be a good idea for you to get some sleep now so you can be awake for the opening of Virginia's Place." I stared down at his closed eyes and his breathing evening out again. "No response to that, huh?"

We'd worked out over the six months that we'd had him home, that he just liked to be cuddled. Sometimes there was nothing wrong with him other than the fact he wasn't being held.

Nyah had driven herself crazy, blaming herself for his first few months, convinced he'd be scarred for life. She'd gotten on every mommy forum until she'd been questioning everything and felt like utter shit. That had been the day we'd decided if what James needed was to be held, then we would just hold him. There were four of us. We could hold him twenty-four seven if that's what he wanted.

Nyah had left all the mommy groups and decided to just trust her own instincts.

James had flourished. He'd grown into the cutest, smartest, most perfect baby, though Nyah said I was biased when I went on about how cool our kid was.

I disagreed. He just was that awesome. He was sitting up and trying to work out the whole crawling business.

Violet's baby, TK, had just started, and X had been checking in every day, asking if James had started.

He was planning to race them as soon as he was.

I talked in a low, monotone voice telling James all about how proud we were of the women and children's center we'd built over the last six months, and how proud I was of Nyah and Isabella who'd come up with so many amazing ideas for it. Isabella, with her Gen Z knowledge, had started a whole social media campaign that had gone pretty viral, at least by Saint View standards.

We were expecting a big turnout today, including the press and local members of government, who were all coming to officially help open the center.

"I hope your grandmother would be proud of what we've built," I whispered. "I hope it honors her well."

I felt Virginia in every room of this house. She'd been such a staple here for almost all of my life, it was impossible not to feel her presence. It had

become even stronger since we'd brought James home, and I liked how it felt. I hoped that wherever she was, she was proud of what we were doing in her name.

James was asleep in my arms again, and it was tempting to just stay here, watching him breathe.

The door creaked just a little, and I looked up.

Dax stood in the doorway in nothing but his plaid striped pajama pants. "You okay?" he mouthed. Then made a back-and-forth motion with two fingers, silently asking if I needed to swap out.

I shook my head as I stood and gently lowered James back into his crib. I needn't have bothered though, because that was one great thing about our boy. He might have screamed like he was being murdered at all hours of the night, but once he was asleep, he was out.

For two hours at least.

I tiptoed across the room anyway, slipping through the doorway and closing the door behind me.

It was mostly dark, only a small round nightlight plugged into the outlet that we kept there so no one fell down the stairs when stumbling from our room to James's to the kitchen for bottles or sterilized pacifiers.

It lit up just enough of Dax's abs for me to notice them.

"He okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "What are you doing up? You were drowning in drool when I left."

He rolled his eyes. "I can't sleep. Lynx and Nyah are out cold, but I'm too wired about all the things we have to do today. I need to make coffee, then get dressed. I've got to pick up those signs that weren't ready yesterday, and someone needs to let Hayden in with the food—"

I reached out and tucked one finger into the waistband of his pajama pants. I dragged him in closer by them, unashamedly taking a peek down them as I did. "You don't have to do any of that before the sun rises."

Dax stared at me. "You really going to start that here? In the hallway?"

"You got somewhere else you want me to start it?"

Dax swore under his breath, but there was a smile to it as well. He walked backward into the bathroom across the hallway.

The moment I stepped in behind him, closing the door softly, we were on each other. A clash of mouths and tongues and hands. The plain black T-shirt I slept in hit the tiled floor, cold beneath my bare feet.

And then my knees did.

His dick was already mostly hard, and I wrapped my fingers around him, stroking him while I fit my mouth over the head of him.

He groaned, leaning on the wall behind me and thrusting into my mouth, his eyes closing in pleasure. “Fuck, that feels so good.”

I liked the way he felt too. Dax and I were a complicated feeling, one that had begun wrapped in trauma and had healed into something that felt like love. Not the sort of love I felt for Lynx or for Nyah. Something about Dax and I always felt a little like some weird magnetic pull I couldn’t quite escape, nor wanted to. It was based in friendship, in a brotherhood, but better since I sure as fuck wouldn’t be sucking the dick of someone I was actually related to.

And fuck, I liked sucking his cock. Liked the way he always seemed a tiny bit surprised by how much he liked it. Liked the way his quiet, “Fuck, Luc,” sounded on his tongue when he was getting close and trying not to come.

I would never let anyone else in this world call me Luc, and yet for some reason, I didn’t mind when he did.

A soft knock came from the bathroom door.

I couldn’t answer. I was busy.

But Dax let out a groan. “Yeah. Come in.”

It was only going to be one of two people. And both of them were welcome in this space.

Nyah slipped in, took one look at the two of us, and the sleepy fog in her expression lifted. Her sleep shirt hit the floor a moment later. “Is it any wonder I got pregnant again when this is the show I get when I’m just trying to brush my teeth?”

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NYAH

Dear Diary,
I didn't survive all of this just to exist. I survived to live like this.

Luca down on his knees on the bathroom floor, giving Dax a blow job, was nothing I hadn't seen before.

But it didn't matter how many times I watched Luca stroke his own cock while he pumped Lynx or Dax at the same time, I never got sick of it. I'd discussed things with Violet and Bliss and Rebel and Kara and I knew there was always someone in a group that liked to watch more than the others.

In their relationships, it was a man.

In mine, I was pretty sure it was me.

I couldn't help it. They were all so damn beautiful, with strong arms and thick thighs and perfect cocks. Watching them mess around with each other got me so turned on I was sometimes sure that if it had been anatomically possible, I could have taken all three of them in my pussy.

But even two required a level of arousal that didn't just come out of nowhere.

Watching Dax's cock disappearing in and out of Luca's mouth definitely got me at least halfway there.

I turned on the shower and slipped off my panties. They both watched me, twisting slightly so they could see. I stepped into the spray, grateful we didn't have a curtain and it was just crystal-clear glass that separated us.

I dunked my hair beneath the water, letting the hot stream flow over my body. My tits ached, full of milk and ready to feed James when he woke for the morning. I squeezed my nipples, letting just a little bit of milk out to take the edge off the full feeling.

It had the double bonus of feeling really fucking good when I was watching two men I loved enjoy each other.

"Don't stop," I murmured to them, loving the way they watched me play with myself. I slid one hand down, over the newest baby bump I'd been growing, and between my legs.

They groaned.

I grinned, loving giving them a show as much as they were giving me one.

Dax's dick shined beneath the overhead bathroom light. His entire length was covered in Luca's saliva, and his fingers fisted in his hair, trying to slow him down.

Luca pushed his hand away.

Dax gave up the fight and let loose, fucking Luca's mouth, grabbing his hair again, encouraging Luca to take all of him. All while he watched me rolling my clit and playing with my nipples.

"Fuck, Nyah. There's no way I can hold out when you're standing there doing that."

"Don't come," I told him. "I want you inside me."

Luca sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and breathing hard.

Dax practically whimpered at the loss of him.

Luca just laughed and slapped Dax's thick thigh. "You heard her."

Dax flipped him the bird and picked up a towel, using it to pull me out of the shower.

Water went everywhere; the towel and Dax both got soaked.

"Dax!"

But he didn't seem to care about my complaints of flooding the bathroom. Luca threw another towel at me, but I was definitely still dripping water when Dax carried me out of the bathroom and back to our bedroom.

Lynx glanced up from scrolling his phone as we all tumbled back in, naked, in various states of arousal.

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh look. The Pornhub cast just walked into my bedroom.”

Luca grinned at him, wrapping his hand around Dax’s cock and taking back up the job of pumping him. “Jealous?”

Lynx lay back on the bed. “Absolutely,” he agreed, without even an ounce of jealousy in his voice. All there was, was pure need. “Get over here and do that to my dick.” And then he looked at me. “You haven’t kissed me yet this morning.”

I crawled across the bed to him on my hands and knees and kissed his perfect mouth. His tongue pressed inside, and he held the back of my head, moaning against my lips, though I couldn’t be one-hundred-percent sure if that was because of the kiss or because Luca had taken control of Lynx’s cock.

Fingers slid up the backs of my thighs, then between them, opening me up from behind. Dax’s hot, wet cock probed at my soaked core and pushed inside easily, bottoming out.

I shouted at the thick, perfect intrusion and reached a hand back for him. He threaded his fingers through mine, holding on to me while he fucked me from behind, a position that I’d come to really enjoy since I felt like I’d been pregnant for the best part of the last two years.

It didn’t matter how pregnant I got. I would always want them. And right now, I was in the lovely second trimester where I was no longer sick but not yet huge, and all I wanted to do was use their cocks for every ounce of pleasure I could get out of them.

I kissed my way down Lynx’s chin, then his neck, then his chest, paying more attention to his nipples while Luca worked his dick.

Lynx’s fingers stroked through my hair. Dax plowed into me from behind, the soft, gentle feeling from Lynx matching perfectly with the harder, more erotic pace Dax set.

It was forever on my mind to make sure all of them understood exactly how much I needed them. That there was never a favorite, just each of them fulfilling a different need in my life, and all of them completely owning me in the bedroom.

I loved being sandwiched between them. Taken in front, and from behind. Loved feeling so damn wanted in ways I never had before.

Every single day these men worshipped me like I was some sort of goddess, both in and out of the bedroom. Outside it, they would pick up my favorite coffee, even though I hadn't asked for one. They rarely let me get up at night, not unless James actually needed to be fed, and even then, as soon as he was done, one of them would be reaching for him, ready to change his diaper, burp him, and get him back to sleep. It had been months of gentle care while I was broken, and then a much more pleasurable sort of attention once I'd healed.

We'd had sex in every room of the house, in every way I could imagine, and yet every day they constantly surprised me with how they could make me feel with just one look, one touch, one whispered word in my ear that would have me running for our bedroom, dragging them along with me.

It was absolutely no surprise to any of us when I'd peed on a pregnancy test and the double pink lines had appeared almost immediately.

None of us could wait for our second baby's arrival.

But we were enjoying the second trimester while we were in it.

Lynx pushed Luca off him, and pulled me down onto the bed, so we were lying side by side, facing each other. He kissed me 'til my head spun, while Dax lay down behind me, slow thrusting into me at a pace that was driving us both wild. It hit every good spot inside me.

But he pulled out long enough for Lynx to have a turn, and it was only once Lynx was on the verge of coming that he rolled away, breathing hard. "You feel too fucking good. I need a minute."

Luca was happy to take his spot. He kissed my mouth and lifted my leg over his thigh, opening me up so he could slip inside me.

I was so ready for him, well primed by Dax and Lynx and desperate for more.

I reached back for Dax, grabbing his hip, drawing him closer.

The next time Luca pulled out, Dax pushed in.

Luca murmured over the top of my lips, "You can take us both. You're so wet."

"Yes," I groaned.

Luca thrust inside me as well, and all three of us shouted at the sensation of my body stretching to accommodate the two of them. They liked having me like this, both of them inside me, their cocks rubbing against each other as well as against the internal walls of my pussy.

Luca sank his top teeth into the fleshy part of my shoulder, not hard enough to hurt, but just enough for me to know he was there. His breath misted over my sweaty skin, and he moaned hard as Lynx, obviously recovered enough to want to join back in, pushed inside him from behind.

It didn't matter what combination we found ourselves in. It was always mind-blowing. We moved together as a foursome, as a unit. As four individuals who'd chosen each other over and over again and would continue doing so for the rest of our lives. Because that was what a family did. It was that love that bound us together, that had held us up through all of it, and it was what we'd welcome our second child into.

Hopefully in a much less dramatic fashion than their older sibling had arrived in.

I wanted a quiet life. One surrounded by family and friends. One where my kids could ride their bikes in the street and I didn't have to worry that someone might abduct them.

And every step we'd taken in the last six months took us farther down that path, our pasts staying firmly behind us where they belonged.

I came with two of my men inside me, the third with his fingers wrapped in mine, his gaze over Luca's shoulder and his touch connecting all four of us.

My orgasm wasn't loud. It was soft moans, pulsing pleasure, and a deep-rooted feeling of safety. Theirs were an echo, all four of us finding our releases in sync after many, many rounds of practice.

I lay spent in the tangle of their arms and legs, nowhere else I'd rather be.

Except…

My phone rang.

Dax rolled over, plucked it from the nightstand, and passed it to me. "Uh-oh."

I glanced at the display, then answered, "Hey, Isabella!"

"Don't you 'hey, Isabella' me! Where are you guys? We have a million things to do this morning. Luca! I know you can hear me. You need to go get the cupcakes I ordered! And I need someone over here to mop this floor. The tradespeople were obviously here yesterday because there's dust and dirt all over it again, even though I only mopped it yesterday. This is a disaster!"

I hid a smile, loving the fact the things Isabella now thought were disasters were as innocent as cupcakes and dirty floors. That was exactly what this new center would symbolize. I wanted that level of problems for every woman and child who walked through the door. If we could create an environment that helped them escape abuse and to learn how to smile and find themselves again, then our jobs would be done.

I couldn’t wait to try.

And I couldn’t wait to do it with the three men I loved standing by my side.

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EPILOGUE

NYAH

Dear Diary,
This is the only empire I ever wanted.

I held my glass of sparkling water up, joining the dozens of other glasses held by the people around me. We stood shoulder to shoulder in the same event room we'd used for the press conference earlier in the year, but this time, instead of reporters, we were surrounded by the Vipers and their families.

"Cheers to first place!" X shouted.

Everyone looked at him.

French's sister stood beside him, pretty and healthy, despite the trauma she'd gone through.

French patted X on the shoulder. "We came in last, buddy."

"That's just first at the other end!"

Lynx grinned. "You know what? We had a hell of a year. So much so, this end-of-season celebration could almost double as a preseason celebration. But even though we're months late, I appreciate you all coming down here to do what we should have done months ago. And that's celebrating all of you. The fact we even made it to the end of last season at all is a miracle. So yeah. Cheers to first at the other end!"

Even the players chuckled at that.

They were all good sports.

Lynx cleared his throat though. “We know our personal stuff got in the way this year. And that wasn’t fair to any of you. You were lumped with an inexperienced coach, one who wanted to play more than I ever wanted to coach, and an owner who didn’t even know one end of a hockey stick from the other.”

Luca grumbled something about that, but we all knew it was true.

“Things will be different next season. We’ll be making changes, but what won’t change is all of you. You are what made this team great this season, even if that wasn’t reflected on the scoreboard. You were the guys who showed up every practice and trained yourselves, even when Luca and I couldn’t.” He shifted James on his hip. His little black, white, and purple Vipers jersey hugged his chubby baby belly, and Lynx stroked a hand over James’s hair. “You guys had our backs, even when we didn’t have yours, and we’re grateful for it. So raise your glasses again, to the players, to their families, and to coming back better and stronger than ever.”

“Cheers to actually scoring some points next season,” French said with a laugh.

“I’ll toast to that because I’d love to not have French cussing us out every game,” one of the other guys said, his tone full of affection. “I don’t think anyone has ever cared about winning as much as you do, French.”

He made no apologies for it. “I want to be a champion. So sue me.”

Lynx nodded at him. “We’ll do more of that next season. I don’t know how, or what that’ll look like yet, but we’ll do whatever it takes to make it happen.”

That was met with more cheers.

Lynx waved his hand. “We do have one award to give out. One that the League only told us about a couple of weeks ago, but we wanted to wait until today when we were all together to let him know.”

The guys all turned to French. He was by far their best player. He stood out instantly, with the way he could weave around his teammates and opponents. He was faster, had more control, and if anyone was going to get an award, the entire room knew it would be him.

He dropped his gaze to the floor, his cheeks going pink with the attention.

Lynx cleared his throat, drawing the focus back to him. “So, everyone, give it up for X, taking out the award for the League’s Mascot of the Year.”

I hid my laughter as X’s mouth dropped open and his screech of excitement ripped through the room. “It was the backflip that got their attention, wasn’t it?”

Lynx handed over the little trophy with X’s legal name printed in small letters. “If that’s what you want to call it, sure.” But he hugged X and told him he’d done a good job.

And he was right. X had been the highlight of the season, and he deserved every award for making people smile. It was a superpower I wasn’t even sure he knew he had, but everyone around him did.

Violet smiled proudly at him, leaning in to kiss his cheek when he returned to where he’d been standing, now with his trophy clutched proudly in his hands.

He was so cute. He was just an overgrown puppy most of the time.

With the formal speech and presentation part of the evening over, a party kicked off. Luca had spared no expense, and food and drinks and music flowed.

All while I kept a little secret I wasn’t sure how the guys were going to take.

I’d tried to herd the three of them together earlier in the day, but with party preparation, and me busy at Virginia’s Place, it had been impossible. And it was really important to me that they were all there.

I found Lynx in the center of the dance floor and dragged him off it. Dax was at the food table, and he grabbed a sushi roll before I herded him along with us. I caught Luca’s eye from across the room, which wasn’t difficult because it was never long before he looked in my direction. He held James on his lap while he talked to French, but at my head jerk, indicating he should meet us outside, he stood to follow.

We burst out into the night air. Summer was in full swing, and the warm air danced across my bare arms and legs, the breeze at my back, pushing me along like it wanted this secret revealed as much as I did.

As the door swung closed behind us, all three of them focused on me. James reached his chubby arms in my direction, repeating, “Ma, Ma, Ma,” over and over until I took him from Luca and kissed his sweet head.

I cleared my throat. “I need to confess something and I’m really scared you’re all going to be mad at me.”

Dax snorted. “If it’s that you were the one who left the milk out last night and let it go bad, it’s fine.”

I shook my head. “No, that was definitely Luca.”

He shot me a look. “Thanks for that.”

But he didn’t deny it.

I wiped one sweaty palm on the side of my hip. “No, what I’ve done is way worse.”

True concern appeared in Lynx’s expression. “You had your checkup yesterday and you said the baby is fine…

I grimaced, quickly clarifying, because the last thing I wanted was to scare them. “The baby is fine. But while I was there, I might have, accidentally, signed some forms…”

Luca cocked his head to one side. “If you’re telling me you sold our house at your OB/GYN appointment, I’m going to say it was a pretty dodgy place to do a deal.”

I slapped his arm and laughed. “Stop. I’m trying to be serious. I did a really bad thing!”

Dax put his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. “I doubt it. But tell us what you did.”

They all stared at me.

“I asked the doctor to find out the sex and paternity of the baby.”

Lynx squinted at me. “We did those blood tests ages ago, but I thought we decided we didn’t want to know and that it didn’t matter.”

“That’s why I’m awful!” I wailed. “I shouldn’t have done it.” I grabbed his arm. “But Lynx? I swear to God, it was killing me not knowing. Like, keeping me up at night, can’t eat, can’t think straight. I couldn’t stand the mystery! I was going to self-combust.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Wow. Dramatic much?”

“Yes!”

He laughed.

Dax eyed me. “So you know right now if it’s a boy or a girl, and you know who the father is.”

I nodded, biting my lip. “I do, and you all have every right to hate me. We agreed we weren’t going to find out the results, but they were *right there* on her file, and I just caved.”

“Weakling,” Luca taunted.

I flipped him off, but he caught my finger and brought it to his lips to kiss the tip.

“Come on then. Tell us.”

I glanced at Lynx and Dax, who both suddenly looked excited. They both nodded.

Lucky, ’cause I couldn’t keep it in a second longer. “It’s a girl!”

I’d never seen three smiles widen so fast. In a second, I was crushed between the three of them, James laughing at being squished in the middle of his daddies.

Luca grinned. “We have a little boy and a baby girl. Fuck. That’s about the coolest thing ever.” He realized I hadn’t told him all of the results. “Who’s the father?”

I scrunched up my face, then peered at them through one eye. “Dax is.”

Luca groaned. “You gotta be kidding me! He got another one?”

I hid my laughter as Dax fist pumped the air in victory. “Lucky you’re a guy, Luc, otherwise I probably would have knocked you up by now too.”

Luca made a face at him.

I rubbed Lynx’s arm. “Are you disappointed?”

He recoiled a tiny bit. “What? Absolutely not. It doesn’t matter to me. All I care about is that she’s okay.”

I pressed up on my toes and kissed his mouth. “I love you. And our baby girl is going to love you too.”

He grinned at me and deepened the kiss, stealing my mouth.

Dax swooped in next, whispering in my ear that he loved me more than he ever thought possible. I hugged him tight, knowing this man was probably the main reason I could be this happy. If it hadn’t been for him, for the way he loved me, for the way he accepted what I needed and always put me first, I was sure the four of us wouldn’t be standing here, celebrating our baby and the family we were building together.

I pulled away and looked at Luca. I couldn’t help laughing at him. “Are you sulking?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “No, but I am contemplating getting my sperm checked. How many times do I have to bend you over the kitchen table to make a baby with you?”

I winked at him. “You can try some more after this one is born.”

He stepped in, sweeping me into his arms and kissing me hard. “Oh, you better believe it, princess.”

Lynx and Dax wrapped their arms around us. And all I could think was that out of darkness, good things always sprouted. I would never be a Mafia princess again. I was nobody's biker queen, and I was never going to sit on an inked throne.

But I had my men and my children. I had safety and security. I had a life I wanted to live, which was a world away from the woman who'd stood on the balcony of her parents' house, contemplating ending it all.

I was still here because of James. Because of Dax and Lynx and Luca. I was still here despite every man who'd tried to keep me down.

I was still here because I wanted to be. Because I loved them, and because I was loved in return. This was the only empire I wanted.

The one I called my family.

The End

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*Locked Up Liars (Saint View Prison, #1)

*Solitary Sinners (Saint View Prison, #2)

*Fatal Felons (Saint View Prison, #3)

Saint View Psychos series (Reverse harem, romantic suspense. Complete.)

*Start a War (Saint View Psychos, #1)

*Half the Battle (Saint View Psychos, #2)

*It Ends With Violence (Saint View Psychos, #3)

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Saint View Rebels (Reverse harem, romantic suspense. Complete)

*Rebel Revenge (Saint View Rebels, #1)

*Rebel Obsession (Saint View Rebels, #2)

*Rebel Heart (Saint View Rebels, #3)

Saint View Slayers Vs. Sinners (Reverse harem, romantic suspense.Complete)

*Wife Number One (Saint View Slayers Vs. Sinners, #1)

*Torn in Two (Saint View Slayers Vs. Sinners, #2)

*Three to Fall (Saint View Slayers Vs. Sinners, #3)

Saint View Murder Squad (Reverse harem, romantic suspense. Complete)

***** X's and O's (Saint View Murder Squad, #1)

*Whips and Chains (Saint View Murder Squad, #2)

*Reaper and Ruin (Saint View Murder Squad, #3)

Saint View Blood and Ink (Reverse harem, romantic suspense. Ongoing)

*****Diary of a Mafia Princess (Saint View Blood and Ink, #1)

*Diary of a Biker Queen (Saint View Blood and Ink, #2)

*Diary from an Inked Throne (Saint View Blood and Ink, #3)

Saint View Strip (Male/Female, romantic suspense standalones. Complete.)

*Evil Enemy (Saint View Strip, #1)

*Unholy Sins (Saint View Strip, #2)

*Killer Kiss (Saint View Strip, #3)

* Caged Bird (Saint View Strip, #4)

Dirty Cowboy series (complete)

*Talk Dirty, Cowboy (Dirty Cowboy, #1)

*Ride Dirty, Cowboy (Dirty Cowboy, #2)

*Sexy Dirty Cowboy (Dirty Cowboy, #3)

*Dirty Cowboy boxset (books 1-3)

*25 Reasons to Hate Christmas and Cowboys (a Dirty Cowboy bonus novella, set before Talk Dirty, Cowboy but can be read as a standalone, holiday romance)

Buck Cowboys series (Spin off from the Dirty Cowboy series. Complete.)

*Buck Cowboys (Buck Cowboys, #1)

*Buck You!(Buck Cowboys, #2)

*Can’t Bucking Wait (Buck Cowboys, #3)

*Mother Bucker (Buck Cowboys, #4)

The Only You series (Contemporary romance. Complete)

*Only the Positive (Only You, #1) - Reese and Low.

*Only the Perfect (Only You, #2) - Jamison.

*Only the Truth - (Only You, bonus novella) - Bree.

*Only the Negatives (Only You, #3) - Gemma.

*Only the Beginning (Only You, #4) - Bianca and Riley.

*Only You boxset

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here we are at the end of another Saint View trilogy. If you'd told me back in early 2020, when I wrote *Saint View High*, that I'd still be writing in this world almost seven years later, I would have been absolutely shocked. And yet, here we are with another Saint View story complete.

There's no cliff-hanger leading into the next series this time, but rest assured, this is definitely not the end of Saint View.

As long as you keep reading these books, I promise I'll keep writing them. If you have a favourite character you'd love to hear more about, we'll absolutely have those discussions in my reader group too!

And speaking of the reader group, thank you to my Drama Llamas, you guys make my days so much more fun. If you aren't already a member, come join us! It's a free Facebook reader group where I share all sorts of things, and everyone is welcome. www.facebook.com/groups/ellethorpesdramallamas

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Thorpe lives in a small regional town of NSW, Australia. When she's not writing stories full of kissing, she's wife to Mr Thorpe who unexpectedly turned out to be a great plotting partner, and mummy to three tiny humans. She's also official ball thrower to one slobbery dog named Rollo.

When she's not at the office writing, she's probably out on the family alpaca farm, trying not to get spit on.

You can find her on Facebook or Instagram(@ellethorpebooks or hit the links below!) or at her website www.ellethorpe.com. If you love Elle's work, please consider joining her Facebook fan group, Elle Thorpe's Drama Llamas or joining her newsletter here. www.ellethorpe.com/newsletter



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