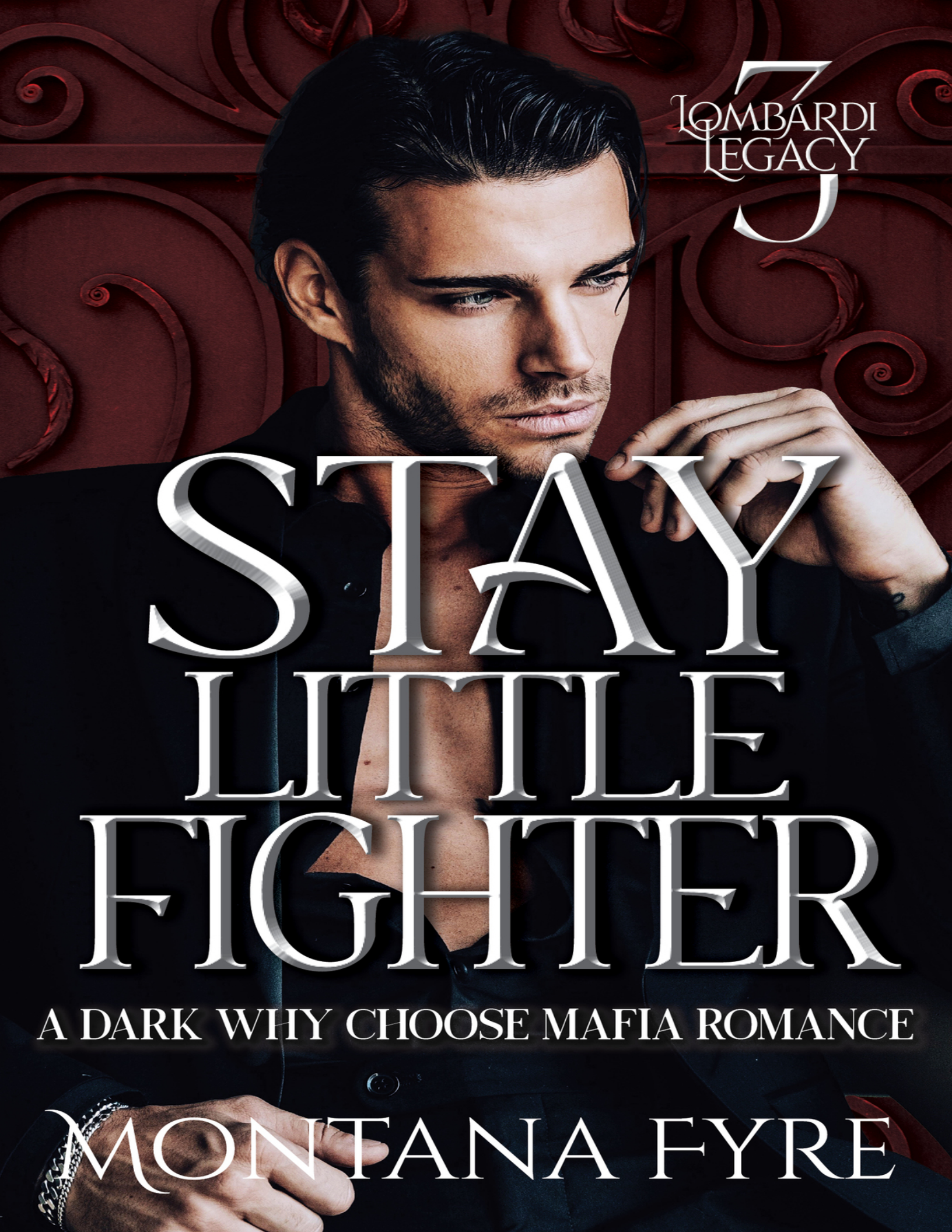

LOMBARDI LEGACY
3
STAY LITTLE FIGHTER
A DARK WHY CHOOSE MAFIA ROMANCE
MONTANA FYRE

# STAY LITTLE FIGHTER

## A DARK WHY CHOOSE MAFIA ROMANCE

LOMBARDI LEGACY

BOOK THREE

MONTANA FYRE

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Also by Montana Fyre

*OceanofPDF.com*

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*If you've ever wanted to see her enemy crawl to her while she's perched in her dad's best friend's lap, this one's for you*

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Be with me always — take any form — drive me mad!
Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!

— EMILY BRONTE

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# CONTENT NOTE

This book/series contains dark themes that some readers may find distressing, including, but not limited to:

V!0lence
T0rture
R@pe (Side Character)
Sexu@l Ass@ult (Not by MMC's)
M!scarr!age
Murder
K!dnapp!ng
Elements of BDSM
Pra!se / Degradat!on
Mental Health Representation
Parental Su!c!de
Dub/N0n C0n
Mention of Ch!ld Abuse
Exh!bit!on!sm

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# PROLOGUE

## DAMON

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

I thought I could do this.

I thought I was strong enough.

I thought I had my feelings for her locked down tight.

But I don't.

Another wave of nausea rolls over me, and this time I can't stop myself from purging what little is in my stomach.

I haven't been able to eat in days, not since my father gave the order.

Because the idea of watching Chloe be killed is unimaginable.

I've done everything in my power to keep her safe. I distanced myself from her, I redirected Dad whenever he set his sights on her, and I tore out my own heart every fucking day to do it.

Do you know what it's like to watch the person you love slowly start to hate you?

It's fucking torture.

And it was all for nothing.

A gunshot vibrates through the cellar, sending my heart into my throat.

How the fuck am I ever going to look Ronan in the eye again? How am I supposed to tell my brother that the woman he's loved his entire life is

gone? How do I tell him that I helped our father hold his pregnant girlfriend for days and forced her to watch as we tortured her parents in front of her?

The thought sends me pitching forward, but my stomach is empty. Agony jolts through my chest as my body tries to expel something that doesn't exist, and I curse myself for not eating more over the last few days.

But I didn't deserve to eat, not when she was being starved.

I swipe the back of my hand over my mouth and shove myself to stand up straight.

If Dad or his men catch me throwing up, I'll get a beating of my own.

Another gunshot rebounds off the brick, and my chest tightens until I can barely suck in a breath.

Clarity slams into me so hard it almost knocks me off my feet.

I can't let this happen.

I can't let him kill her.

As quickly as I can manage, I log into the security system and set off the perimeter alarm as I sprint up the cellar steps.

The guard at the top of the stairs sees my urgency just as his phone sounds with the alarm tone that comes standard on Lombardi devices.

"Call it in!" I shout, continuing through the house as if I'm rushing to secure the perimeter.

I make it to the wet room and drag open the cupboard, spotting the tennis shoes Chloe keeps inside before making my way to the back door and dropping them to the side.

She won't be able to escape with bare feet, and although I want nothing more than to be the one that gets her to safety, I can't.

Not if I want to give her every second of head start I can.

I'm halfway down the cellar steps when my father drags the door to her cell open, irritation rolling off him in waves.

His eyes meet mine, fury burning in the dark pools. "Lock the door. I'll deal with the girl once the compound is secure."

He's not speaking to me specifically, but I nod anyway, moving toward the metal door and pretending to snap the lock in place.

I glance in through the small window at the top, my chest tightening at the sight of Chloe's tears. They've been almost nonstop for days, and every single one is like a fresh cut in my armor.

It takes a few seconds before she realizes the lock never engaged, and I barely manage to duck out of view as she glances toward the door.

I remain plastered against the wall for long seconds, listening for any sign that she's trying to escape.

Holding my breath, I internally beg her to fight, and then it comes.

A soft yelp of pain.

Pride fills my chest when I chance one final look through the window and find her clutching her hand to her chest.

I taught her that. I taught her how to get out of wrist restraints if she was ever taken, and I'm relieved she remembered.

Lingering for one final second, I press my forehead to the steel door and drag in a breath.

This could very well be the last time we're in close proximity, and there are a million things I'm desperate to say.

But instead, I suck in a breath and turn on my heel, intent to keep our men distracted for long enough for her to escape.

If I want to ever be able to look my brother in the eye again, I have to make sure she and the baby escape, even if I never breathe a word of my assistance to anyone.

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# CHAPTER ONE
# CHLOE

## NOW

I’ve had a lot of really dumb ideas over the years.

Like that time I got bangs because I saw a celebrity with them and assumed I would look as cute as she did.

Or when I pretended I was interested in Steven Picking in freshman year to make the brothers jealous, only to get the poor guy beaten to a pulp for touching me.

But this is going straight to the top of the list.

Because I just threw myself in front of a bullet for the man that has made it his mission in life to make me miserable.

For almost fifteen years, he’s gone out of his way to hurt me, to make me feel worthless and unwanted, and yet for some reason self-preservation abandoned ship as I stepped in front of him.

Fiery pain radiates through my abdomen, but the pain doesn’t stay localized. It spreads throughout my body like a wildfire.

I hit the ground hard, but I’m too wrapped up in agony to feel the extra pain.

I’m vaguely aware of my own tears as stars dance in my vision, but I can’t tell if it’s from the panic of being shot or because the bullet hit something important.

If I spent all these years on the run just to die taking a bullet for Damon, I'm going to be really fucking irritated.

Even if it was a decision I made for myself.

Knees hit the ground beside me, and I blink up into panicked ice-blue eyes. His hands hover above me, but he hesitates to touch me despite how deeply I crave it.

I shouldn't. Not after everything that's happened between us, but I do, and the longer we spend together outside the walls of the Lombardi compound, the more I need him.

"Duchess," he rumbles. "Why would you do that?"

His voice cracks under the gravity of the words, and I stare up at him, recognizing the emotions flickering across his face.

Fear. Anguish. Guilt.

They're so clear I try to blink away the hallucination, but it's not one.

It's real.

"To save you," I whisper.

"Don't you get it? Everything I've done has been to save *you*! Everything. Loving you. Hating you. Betraying you. Every. Single. Fucking. Thing. And you go and do this?"

His panic grows by the second, his eyes darting around at the impending threat, but he barely pauses on the men that approach us.

The same ones that are trying to take us.

It takes longer than I care to admit for his words to sink in.

Did Damon just admit to loving me?

"Chloe!" He shakes my shoulders, forcing my attention back to him as stars dance in my vision.

"It hurts," I whisper.

"I know, Duchess." His voice is pained, as if my pain is as excruciating for him as it is me.

"Get her up!" one of our assailants demands.

"She needs a doctor," Damon grinds out. "Just take me. Take me and leave her here where she can get help."

I never thought I'd see the day Damon Lombardi begged anyone for anything. He's the most resolute person I've ever met. Strong and unyielding in the face of danger.

But apparently not when it comes to me.

The thought makes my heart ache, his words from before playing in the back of my mind on a loop. Trusting anything that comes out of his mouth feels risky after everything he's put me through. But how am I supposed to deny it when he sounds so broken?

"There's a first aid kit in the van," he grunts, grasping Damon's shoulder to drag him to his feet.

A half laugh, half sob bubbles in my throat, because what the hell is a first aid kit going to do for my bullet wound? I might as well ask them to kill me now if that's the level of care I can expect.

Damon's attention drops back to me, and I watch as the mask he wears for the world slides back into place. He bends over and scoops me into his arms, unbothered by my blood.

Our attackers step toward the van, and I assume they're searching for the first aid kit they've assured me they have, but I'm surprised when they leave us unattended.

Maybe it's because Damon's shown his hand, shown how much I mean to him, and they know he won't risk me being hurt again, or perhaps they're just idiots, but Damon lifts me slightly, bringing his lips to the shell of my ear.

"Reach into my pocket and grab my ring," he murmurs.

I blink a few times, trying to think of what ring he could be talking about but when I come up empty, I do as I'm told, even as pain radiates through my abdomen.

The fact my condition doesn't appear to be worsening gives me hope that I'm not on death's doorstep, but there's a chance adrenaline is the only thing keeping me conscious.

I fumble a couple of times, biting down on the inside of my cheek to stop the yelp of pain from escaping as I twist awkwardly.

When my fingers finally wrap around metal, I tug it free.

"Good girl," he murmurs. "Now when we reach the edge of the van, I want you to drop it there. Can you do that for me?"

I frown, eyes darting over his features as if they alone can give me the answers I'm looking for. But when he doesn't elaborate, I nod.

It goes against my instincts to blindly trust Damon. After years of cruelty. Years of lies and betrayal, the only thing that comes naturally when it comes to him is a healthy dose of suspicion. But right now he is my best chance of survival.

It’s either rely on him to save us or die, because there’s no way I’m escaping alone with a gunshot wound.

We reach the edge of the van, and I keep my eyes locked on the men as I drop the cool metal onto the edge of the road, hoping like hell that Damon knows what he’s doing, because right now, it could be the only thing that gets us out of this alive.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# KINGSTON

### NOW

Glancing at the bag of weapons we packed before we left the cabin, my stomach sinks. We're almost out of ammo.

Guilt slams into my chest as I unload my clip through the shattered window of the room Chloe and I were sleeping peacefully in twenty minutes ago, but I force my mind to remain on task.

Backup will be here shortly.

We just have to hold them off until the guys get here.

I'll admit, when Ryker told me Corbin had gone over my head and ordered backup for us, I was pissed. It's not his job to make that kind of call. But then he helpfully pointed out that our only chance of getting out of here alive is because they took it upon themselves to make sure we were covered if we needed it.

So maybe it's me I'm annoyed with.

For not thinking through all the possibilities.

For underestimating our opponent.

For letting my ego get in the way of protecting Chloe.

"How far out are your guys?" Ronan shouts from the other room.

Ryker disappeared out the bathroom window not long after Damon and Chloe. I made him promise he wasn't going after them, but it's been at least

five minutes, and he hasn't surfaced around the front, making me think he's done exactly that.

He doesn't trust Damon with her safety, and if I'm honest, I don't either.

We should have sent her with Ronan, but his brother was the only one that had shoes on and could get her out the quickest, which was ultimately the most important thing.

I duck below the window and check my phone for updates. Thankfully Ryker had the forethought to hand it off before he took off to do whatever it is he's doing.

Bringing up the app I use to track all my guys, I'm relieved to find Rocco's tracker just a few miles away, and with the way Remy drives, they'll be here any minute now.

"They're close!" I call out.

"Thank fuck."

He can say that again.

The sooner we take out these assholes, the sooner I can get eyes back on my girl and make sure she's not hurt.

Even the thought makes my stomach bottom out as a fresh spray of bullets unleashes through the window.

While I have the app open, I check on Ryker, comforted when I find the tracker still active, meaning he hasn't gone and got himself killed. I'm also relieved when I find him still within the vicinity of the motel.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I check how much ammunition I have left and let out a rough curse.

The clip is almost empty, and given how long it's been since Ronan has fired, I can only assume he's in the same boat.

Two men approach the motel, their weapons drawn as they move with precision. I have no fucking clue how Vega is affording this kind of manpower, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it as soon as we make it out of here.

*If* we make it out of here.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, a car screams into the parking lot alongside a spray of bullets that has me ducking back beneath the window.

"Please tell me these are your guys?" Ronan calls out as the men approaching the motel dive onto the ground.

Remy's matte black McLaren comes into view with Rocco hanging out of the open window with a semi-automatic clutched in his hands.

I slump down beneath the window for a moment, allowing relief to wash over me. I may have never thought the idea into the universe, but there were moments over the last fifteen minutes where I questioned whether we wouldn't make it out alive.

"Yep," I finally reply.

I lift my head up when the sound of guns quietens.

The van Sebastian was sitting in when Corbin accessed the cameras suddenly jerks into motion. He makes it a few yards before the tires are popped one by one, and Ryker appears beside the driver's side door with his gun pointed at Vega.

Movement behind me pulls my attention to Ronan shoving things in bags without bothering to check who they belong to.

With one final glance out the window to ensure our attackers are dead or disarmed, I push to my feet and tuck my weapon into the back of my pants.

"You okay?"

Ronan's eyes flick up to meet mine, his jaw set in a hard line. "I'll be better once we make sure Chloe and Damon are okay."

I nod and step into the adjoining room, following his lead in throwing anything I pick up into the closest bag.

The guys outside have a handle on it and the sooner we're out of this godforsaken motel, the better.

By the time we step into the cool night, Ryker has Sebastian face down in the gravel with his boot in the center of his back while he talks to Rocco.

"Boss man!" he greets with a wide smile.

"What have I told you about that nickname?"

He smirks and pats my shoulder before turning back to Ryker.

"He give you anything?" I ask.

"Nope." He chuckles. "Seems Sebby here knows how desperate I am to whip out my knives after a few months off the tools."

Rocco barks out a laugh and stalks off to help Remy throw a body into the back of one of the vans they came in.

"The guys already called in the cleanup crew, and the motel manager is nowhere to be seen. Wouldn't be surprised if they're the ones that sold us out and didn't want to be here for the fallout."

"Other guests?"

"Negative. We were the only ones checked in for the night."

I frown. Even off the beaten track, I would have expected other guests, but at least it will save us having to pay for their silence.

“I’m going to tie this asshole up and get him loaded up. You want to see if you can find Chloe and the asshole Lombardi?”

I scoff. “You know you can’t keep calling him things like that, right? Especially when you’re the one playing matchmaker.”

“Just because Chloe likes him doesn’t mean I have to. I just have to be nice to him when she’s around.”

Rolling my eyes, I head toward the road, leaving the carnage for the others to deal with.

The streetlights cast shadows through the small town, but it doesn’t seem like we’ve drawn the attention of anyone that lives here.

I cross the street and pause at the edge of the tree line, considering my options.

They could be hiding just about anywhere in the thick forest, but calling out to them when there could be more of Vega’s guys lying in wait is its own risk.

I take a step forward, intending to look for footprints, but when something metallic clinks across the asphalt, I pause in place.

My heart lodges in my throat as I look around, expecting to find a bullet casing. What if one of them was shot while they were running? What if they’re being chased through the woods right now?

It takes me a few seconds to find whatever I kicked, but when I spot the ring, my stomach bottoms out for another reason.

I crouch down and pluck the piece of jewelry from the road, brushing off the dirt to uncover the Lombardi crest.

Despite leaving the family years ago, I still have mine tucked in the back of my desk drawer, a constant reminder of why I do the job I do.

But my stomach sinks when I realize it’s not just dirt clinging to the gold band.

It’s blood.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# KINGSTON

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

Sleeping in the armchair in the corner of the room is far from ideal, but it's as far as I can allow myself from Chloe while I rest.

I tried the couch on the first night, but not having eyes on her when I woke up made me uneasy, so this is the lesser of two evils.

It's been well over twenty-four hours since she last woke up, but every time I call the doctor, she tells me the same thing.

Chloe's body and mind need to rest.

She'll wake up when she's ready, and I just need to be patient until that happens.

Or at least that's what Christine says.

I drag a restless hand down my face and stifle a yawn.

For some reason sleep won't come tonight, and not even work is doing the trick to distract me.

It doesn't seem to matter how many times I remind myself that she's breathing, I can't kick the feeling that something's not right.

It's probably just paranoia after years of not giving a fuck about anyone. I'm not used to feeling anything toward other people, let alone the kinds of emotions swirling in my chest ever since I saw Chloe curled up on that gas station floor.

Pushing to my feet, I move toward the bed to watch her breathe for a few minutes.

Yes, I realize how completely batshit crazy that sounds, but it's the only way I've found to reassure myself she'll be okay for a few hours while I sleep.

I crouch down at the edge of the bed and run my eyes over her face, frowning when I find sweat on her brow.

The room has been kept at a constant temperature since I first tucked her under the mountain of blankets, and I haven't changed anything in the last hour since I checked her.

Reaching out, I press my fingers to her forehead as gently as I can manage. At this point I'm convinced Chloe could sleep through a hurricane, but if she needs the rest, I want to give it to her.

Searing hot skin presses against my palm, and my stomach rolls with anxiety.

She has a fever.

Going against the doctor's orders, I tug the blankets down and gently brush my fingers down her arm, trying my best to wake her slowly.

The last thing she needs right now is to be startled.

"Chloe," I murmur. "Wake up for me, Mama."

It takes three attempts to rouse her, but when bloodshot eyes blink up at me, I struggle to keep my face neutral.

"Hi, pretty girl," I say softly. "How are you feeling?"

She frowns, her eyes tracking around the room as she gets her bearings. I think if I slept for as long as she has, only waking up a handful of times to use the bathroom, I'd be pretty fucking disoriented as well.

Green orbs finally meet mine. "I don't feel right," she croaks.

I suck in a breath, forcing my body to remain calm despite the anxiety that rolls through my gut. "Tell me what's wrong, Mama."

"I'm…damp."

"Do you think you just had too many blankets?"

"No." She shakes her head as a shiver vibrates through her body. "I'm not hot. At least, I don't think I am."

Her frown deepens, and I reach for my phone to call the doctor. She's going to stop answering my calls soon if I'm not careful, but I need her to come check Chloe. I'll never be able to forgive myself if I ignored my gut and something happened to her.

I already did that once.

Shaking off the thought, I force my mind from my late best friend. There will be time for a pity party once I'm sure Chloe is okay.

I reach for the water bottle on the bedside table and slip an arm behind her back to help her sit up.

She hisses at the movement, her good hand shooting out to steady herself.

"Chloe?"

"Something's wrong," she whispers, slowly dragging her hand from beneath the blanket and for a second, my entire world tips on its axis.

Thick crimson coats her fingers, and we both stare for long seconds.

I shove myself to my feet and tear the blankets back, uncovering her bare legs and a pool of blood beneath her.

So much fucking blood.

"King," she whispers, her voice breaking under the weight of the word.

Without hesitating, I scoop her off the bed and set off running toward the door.

I don't give a fuck about the seats of my car or the fact we're both hardly dressed.

All that matters is getting her to the hospital as soon as humanly possible.

"It's going to be okay, Mama. Just hold on for me."

The words burn as they leave my throat, and I'm not sure which of us I'm desperately trying to reassure.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# CHLOE

### NOW

I bite down on my clenched fist to stop myself from screaming.

"I'm sorry, Duchess," Damon mumbles, pressing down on the bullet wound to slow the bleeding.

The first aid kit Asshole One and Asshole Two insisted was in the van is nothing more than three antiseptic wipes and a handful of Band-Aids. Certainly nothing that will stop me from bleeding out.

Damon's using his sweatshirt to press against the wound because the rags they offered us looked filthy at best.

"How did you make it look like it was nothing when you got shot?" I half laugh, half sob. Making light of being shot and kidnapped is an interesting choice on my part, but I need to focus on anything other than the pain.

He huffs out a laugh. "It was a flesh wound, and it also wasn't my first time. Remind me when I'm not busy saving your life to tell you about the time both me and Ronan got shot by one of the women Dad kidnapped for us to marry."

I blink up at him, my lips parted in surprise and amusement. "So you kind of deserved it then?"

He glares down at me. "I didn't kidnap her."

"But you were going to go along with it," I challenge.

“You know what Salvatore’s like.” He sighs, glancing up at the front of the van as if he’ll be able to make out where we’re going.

We’ve been on the road for at least twenty minutes, but the dark roads all look the same as trees blur together as we pass.

The assholes in the front seat haven’t bothered to bind either of us, but I’m in no state to make an escape attempt right now.

“I don’t think Ronan would have gone through with it in the end. He could barely even bring himself to talk to the poor girl. I doubt he would have been able to get through vows to anyone other than you.”

My chest clenches at the reminder that he never gave up on finding me, and I try to tell myself this time won’t be any different.

“It’ll be okay, Duchess. They’ll find us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t I?” He raises a brow. “That overgrown puppy dog you call a bodyguard is like a fucking bloodhound when it comes to you. And you think Ronan abandoned his legacy just to let you slip through his fingers?”

I bite down on my bottom lip as I mull over his words.

He’s right. If there’s anything I’m absolutely sure of, it’s that they won’t give up on finding me. But how long will it take them? How long can I bleed like this before I get medical attention? How long before I get some kind of infection from the wound not being sterilized?

Damon must sense my hesitance because his free hand moves to brush over my cheek. “I won’t let you die, Chloe. I promise.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you might not be able to keep,” I whisper, my chest aching with how desperately I want them to be true.

“Duchess, I haven’t spent my life sacrificing my own happiness at every turn to protect you, just to let you die now.”

I can’t wrap my head around the words that are coming out of his mouth, not when he’s shown me nothing but contempt for almost as long as I can remember.

He stares down at me for long seconds, waiting for me to process the words he’s saying. “I’ve earned your doubt, Chloe, but I’m going to earn your forgiveness as well. I’ll apologize every day for the rest of my life and into the next if that’s what it takes.”

“I don’t—” I’m cut off by the van slowing to a stop, and Damon’s attention pulls to the front window.

The fact that the highly trained assailants haven't bothered to restrain either of us has been niggling at the back of my mind since they closed the doors on us, and both chose to sit in the front seat instead of monitoring us.

I'm a non-issue, seeing as I have a bullet wound and have no way of protecting myself against two fully grown men with guns, but surely they're not banking on Damon staying compliant to keep me safe.

I'm not even confident he's not going to bail the second he gets the chance.

The back door slides open, and two men dressed all in black stand at the edge of the van with their guns raised.

"Get out," one of them barks.

Damon's jaw tightens, but he lifts the hand not pressed to my stomach in the air.

"Both hands."

"She's been shot. I need to keep pressure on the wound," he says calmly.

"Both. Hands." His finger tightens on the trigger, and I barely manage to swallow the sob that tries to escape.

Oh god.

I can't watch Damon die.

Regardless of how much he's hurt me and how unforgivable the things he's done are, watching him bleed out in front of me would destroy me.

I squeeze his hand, silently telling him to do as they ask and hold my own hands over my stomach. It's not the same amount of pressure by any means, but it will have to do for now.

Damon lifts his other hand into the air with his jaw clenched.

"Get out."

He follows the command slowly, carefully unfolding his body from the back of the van.

"She can't walk," he tells them.

A flashlight illuminates their backs, giving me my first proper view of the two of them. The guys who snatched us are still in the front seat watching our every move.

The guy I now realize is blonde rolls his eyes, as if my being shot is the biggest inconvenience of his night.

*Mine too, buddy,* I think to myself.

"You shot her?" he snaps at the driver.

“She stepped in front of a bullet meant for him.”

“Boss is going to be pissed.”

“She’ll get over it.”

Damon’s eyes clash with mine.

*She?*

While we haven’t narrowed down which of the guys is being targeted, we’ve been going on the assumption that it’s Kingston. But as far as I know, there were no women on the list of suspects, and the only people that have been removed so far were those that didn’t have the means to hire this level of support.

The blonde sighs and drags me to the edge of the van by my ankle before throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

A pained cry slips from my throat before I can swallow it, agony slicing through my abdomen with a renewed fire.

If I’d known how much being shot would hurt, I might have reconsidered jumping in front of that bullet.

“Be careful with her,” Damon growls.

“You’re not really in the position to be making demands, Lombardi.” The dark-haired man smirks, as if my pain is the most amusing thing in the world to him.

And maybe it is.

I have no clue who these people are or what they’re capable of.

“I’m telling you that if she gets so much as another scratch, I will kill every single person in your bloodline with a goddamn smile.”

My eyes widen as I stare at the man that spent so much of our lives making me miserable, and my hopeful heart does another flip it has no right doing.

Because no matter how I long for the boy that held one half of my heart before I ever realized what it meant, I’ll never be able to forget every second of pain he’s caused me.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# DAMON

### NOW

I ’ve never wanted to kill anyone more than I do these assholes.

How dare they put their hands on her?

How dare they hurt her?

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I force the mask I’ve spent my life perfecting into place. If there were ever a time to be an unfeeling motherfucker, it’s right now.

I have no doubt that the others will find us, but I have to keep us alive in the meantime.

The barrel of a gun presses into my lower back, forcing me to take a step forward ahead of the motherfucker carrying Chloe like she’s nothing.

Sucking a breath into my lungs, I finally take in my surroundings. This is the thing about caring for others. It’s really fucking distracting.

Dim lights illuminate a farmhouse with boarded windows. The chipped paint and cracked porch are both signs of how long it’s been since someone has lived here.

The sky above us is clear and free of pollution, confirming we’re still far out of any major city, which I figured, seeing as we weren’t driving for long.

I’ve spent my whole life being aware of my surroundings, cataloging every detail around me, looking for threats lying in wait in the shadows. But

I’m struggling to keep my mind on task when Chloe is in danger.

After shutting off my feelings toward her all those years, it’s almost impossible to shove them back in their box while I figure out how to get us the fuck out of here.

Maybe my father wasn’t completely out of his mind when he warned us against caring for others. It’s exactly as distracting as he made it seem all those years.

I catch sight of the asshole carrying Chloe and barely manage to swallow down the snarl that pushes to the surface.

She’s hurt, and he’s carrying her like she’s a bag of fucking flour.

A sharp jab in my spine reminds me why I have to keep my head on straight, even as my skin crawls with the need to kill every single person that has contributed to her pain.

*Soon*, I promise myself.

I’m shoved forward into a dark hallway that matches the exterior of the house. Cracked plasterboard, worn floorboards, and stains covering every surface I cast my eyes over. But I don’t get a chance to map out the floor plan before I’m shoved down a flight of stairs into what I can only assume is a basement.

The urge to fight washes over me, but I manage to squash it when I realize Chloe is being carried down behind me.

Getting her medical care is my priority right now.

There will be plenty of time for revenge once I ensure she’s not going to bleed out.

I’m shoved toward the far wall and barely get a chance to turn around before Chloe is dropped to the hard concrete floor with a sharp yelp.

I step forward, intending to snap the motherfucker’s neck for causing her an ounce of pain, but a rough sob stops me in my tracks.

Dropping to my knees, I pull her into my lap. It’s not much of an upgrade, but it’s infinitely more comfortable than the cold ground.

Neither of the guys that marched us down here says a word before they disappear up the stairs, leaving us alone in the freezing cold basement.

At least they left a light on, I guess.

“How are you doing, Duchess?” I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to her temple.

“It hurts,” she whimpers.

“I know, baby.” I suck in a calming breath, but it does little against the raging fire in my chest.

Helpless is not an emotion I’m intimately familiar with, but as I carefully pull the sweater from Chloe’s stomach, my heart sinks at the sight.

There’s so much blood I can barely believe she’s awake, let alone talking, and it doesn’t seem to be slowing despite the pressure we’ve applied.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. I don’t want to lie to her, but what good is the truth going to do?

“You’re going to be okay.” The words slip out before I can stop them, the need to comfort her beating out the part of me that doesn’t want to give her false hope.

As carefully as I can manage, I move the layers of clothing out of the way to get my first proper view of the wound.

Schooling my features, I press gently around the site.

Chloe whimpering makes me flinch, but I keep working in slow, gentle movements. The least I can do after she took a bullet for me is not cause her any more pain than I already have.

“You’re doing good, Duchess,” I murmur, doing my best to ignore the blood coating my hands.

In any other circumstance, I would revel in it, but not when it’s hers. Not when Chloe is bleeding out and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.

I glance around the dank basement, hoping to see something, *anything*, to slow the bleeding, but when I come up empty, I turn my attention back to the woman I’ve spent the last fifteen years convincing I hate her.

“I need to roll you for a second.”

She shakes her head, fear and pain warring in her pretty green eyes.

“I’ll be as quick as I can, but I need to check for an exit wound.”

Nibbling at her bottom lip, she gives me a jerky nod.

As gently as I can manage, I roll her to the side, trying and failing to ignore the hiss of agony that escapes her.

“You’re doing so good, Duchess,” I praise as I shove the sweater up and bite back a curse when I find clear skin.

No exit wound.

Fuck.

“Damon?” Her voice trembles as she tries to look over her shoulder at me, but I hold her steady. Twisting is only going to make it hurt more, and that’s the last thing she needs right now.

“Just a second, Chlo.”

I brush my fingers over her back, making sure I’m not missing anything, but the longer I search, the more my stomach rolls.

There are too many ways a stray bullet in the body can kill her, and it’s all my fault.

I should have protected her.

I should have made sure she was safe like I promised I would.

I never should have let her take a fucking bullet for me.

My internal meltdown is cut off when the door at the top of the stairs opens and light streams into the dark basement.

I quickly roll Chloe onto her back and position myself between her and the stairs.

One of the assholes that brought us down here takes the steps two at a time, his dark eyes darting between us with a smirk I’m desperate to punch off his smug face.

I’m so busy plotting his death that I almost miss the second set of footsteps.

“Oh my god,” Chloe murmurs, pulling my attention from the dead man.

My jaw drops open, my mind swimming as I stare at eyes I never thought I’d see again.

“If it isn’t my almost husband and the whore he could never get over.”

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# CHAPTER SIX

# RYKER

## NOW

“You’re going to pay for this,” Sebastian spits out like the villain in every shitty action movie I’ve ever seen.

“Sure I am,” I scoff, looping the rope around his back, ensuring he’s secure for transport.

My palms itch with the need to torture him, to get every piece of information he has before ending his sorry existence.

Unfortunately for me, I may not get to kill him if it means starting a war with a crime family, but I’m looking forward to maiming him while I wait for confirmation.

I’ll never begrudge the time I’ve spent guarding Chloe because it’s brought me the single best thing to ever happen to me, but I’d be lying if I said I haven’t missed killing the scum of the earth.

“You have no idea what they’ll do to you when they find out what you’ve done!” he shouts.

“I imagine whatever I’m going to do to you in the meantime will be far worse.”

I shove a rag in his mouth before he has a chance to spout any more threats. He’s not going to give me anything useful while his life isn’t in immediate danger, and I don’t want to listen to another second of his shit until after I’ve made sure Chloe is unharmed.

It’s not lost on me that before she came along, all I cared about was work. All that mattered was killing men like the one who stole my baby sister from us when I was a teenager, and I lived and breathed that goal.

But she changed everything.

She changed me.

I’m the same cruel monster that can dismember a screaming man without blinking, but under the surface, there’s something that’s never been there before.

Love.

It’s not an emotion I’ve ever thought much of. I’ve seen others feel it, watched as people around me found the soul that theirs spoke to, but it never occurred to me that I would ever fall in love.

Until Chloe.

She changed everything, and I’m not too proud to admit that she’s changed me on a fundamental level.

As badly as I crave blood coating my hands, I know without ever having been faced with the decision that I would never kill again if that’s what she wanted.

It seems I am endlessly adaptable when it comes to my siren.

As if conjuring one of the most obvious signs of that, Ronan steps up beside me, his jaw set in a hard line as he stares at Sebastian.

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This motherfucker put our woman in danger, and it’s clear he’s as desperate as I am to exact our revenge.

“Need any help?”

I shake my head. “I have it handled. How’s cleanup going?”

“They have it handled. Never seen two guys less affected by death if I’m honest.” He chuckles. “They’ve been discussing baseball scores while throwing bodies in the back of vans like they’re at a bar having a drink.”

I smirk. “Wait until you meet Enzo.”

Each of the guys has their own strengths, but Enzo's is being cold and unfeeling, much like I was before Chloe came along.

"Kingston's taking a while."

I frown and glance toward the entrance to the motel.

I've been so caught up in securing Vega that I lost track of time, but he's right. It's been at least ten minutes since King took off to find Chloe and Damon, and my stomach rolls with an unfamiliar emotion.

Anxiety.

I attach Sebastian's bound wrists to the inside of the trunk and slam it closed on him before he can whine about it.

If he didn't want to be tortured, maybe he should have thought twice about putting my woman in danger.

Turning on my heel, I stride toward the road with Ronan falling in step beside me. He doesn't have to say a word for me to know he's feeling every bit of worry I am, perhaps more.

He knows what it's like to live without her more than any of us, and I have a feeling he'll be on edge until she's back in his arms.

I glance up and down the dark road, half expecting to see the cops speeding down the quiet stretch, but there's nothing more than a few streetlights.

Ronan stops in his tracks as we cross the street, but it takes me a second to realize what he's looking at.

Or rather, who.

Kingston kneels on the edge of the road with his head dropped low and his body trembling uncontrollably.

The sight alone is enough to make my lungs constrict, and I struggle to drag in a breath.

Because it's almost impossible to bring a man like Kingston Beaumont to his knees, and that can only mean one thing.

Chloe's gone.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

I ’m not sure if the pain has eased or if I’m just getting used to it.

Or perhaps it’s the fact I’m staring at Mikayla Vega as she looks down on Damon and me.

You know what? It’s probably a combination of all three.

I don’t know enough about what ended their engagement to understand how we’ve found ourselves in this position.

Why wasn’t I nosy enough to ask why the wedding didn’t go ahead?

And why the hell does she think I had anything to do with it?

Not only did Damon actively hate me, but I was also long gone by the time their engagement ended.

Stars dance in my vision, and I can’t tell if they’re from the blood loss or the position I’ve found myself in.

Add in the fact I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve been kidnapped recently, and it’s not surprising that I’m not feeling too hot.

Pressing my eyes closed, I force myself to breathe. Panicking is only going to make this situation worse, although I’m struggling to see how having an untreated bullet wound and being held captive by Damon’s jilted lover could get any worse.

“Mikayla,” Damon says slowly. “I don’t understand why you would do this when you’re the one that called off our engagement.”

“Because I was forced to!” she snaps. “Sebastian got himself in trouble, as per fucking usual, and the condition of his release was for me to end things with you.”

I stare at her for long seconds, my mind reeling.

Who the fuck would have benefited from their engagement ending other than Damon? Salvatore wanted the union with the Vega family, even if no one ever understood how it benefited the Lombardis.

He was adamant it would improve their position in the country and abroad, but he never shared the details of how.

Mikayla was obsessed with both brothers from the time we started high school. She may not have been a part of our everyday lives, but she made her attraction known.

The only person that wanted no part in their union was Damon.

“It took me years to figure out who was behind it. They didn’t give Daddy a name when they made their demands and it made it difficult to track, especially given the state Seb was in when he was returned to us. But I needed to know. I needed to make sure they paid for ruining my life.”

I swallow the scoff that tries to force its way to the surface, because she’s concerned *her* life was ruined. She wasn’t the one that was locked in a cellar for days without food or water as she watched her family be tortured and killed in front of her. She wasn’t the one that fled the only life she’d ever known, only to be abandoned.

She wouldn’t know a ruined life if it smacked her in the face, but I have a feeling she’s going to.

Because it won’t take long for my guys to figure out who has us, and they’ll stop at nothing until every single person involved pays for their sins.

“I had nothing to do with it,” Damon says slowly.

“Oh, I know.” She laughs, the sound grating on my already frayed nerves. I couldn’t stand her when we were teenagers, and I sure as hell can’t stand her as adults, especially as pain slices through my abdomen with every breath. “But Kingston Beaumont did. I’ll admit, he did a good job of covering his tracks and keeping his name separate from Hawk Securities, but nothing a good hacker can’t find with enough time and resources.”

Damon’s body goes ramrod straight, locking up at the bomb she just dropped.

King was the one that got him out of the marriage he didn’t want?

Even after years of being hunted by the Lombardi family, he still went out of his way to end an engagement he knew Damon didn't want?

Mikayla crosses her arms over her chest in irritation, as if our surprise is inconvenient to her. I'll tell you what's fucking inconvenient, and that's being shot and kidnapped.

Her tight dress clings to her frame like it was made just for her, her hair pin straight, not a strand out of place.

I don't know where she's staying, but I doubt it's in this decrepit house they've dumped us in.

"What do you want?" Damon finally asks, and my breath catches in my throat as we wait for the answer.

"I want the life that was promised to me," she replies simply.

"What does that mean?" he demands.

"It means we'll be getting married in the morning, and if you even think about trying to stop it, I'll torture the little whore in front of you."

She doesn't give either of us a chance to respond before her sky-high heels are clicking up the stairs, and the door at the top is slamming shut.

The irony isn't lost on me that a couple of weeks ago Kingston was trying to force me to marry him, and now Damon is in the same position I was.

The difference is, I love Kingston, and Damon couldn't stand Mikayla a decade ago. I can't imagine time, a bullet wound, and a kidnapping are going to do anything to change that.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# RONAN

### NOW

My ears haven't stopped ringing since we found Kingston on the side of the road cradling the blood-stained Lombardi crest.

Because for what feels like the hundredth time, Chloe has slipped through my fingers, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

Kingston has completely shut down. He hasn't said a word since we helped him to his feet, and he certainly hasn't let go of my brother's ring.

Ryker immediately went into denial, running into the dense tree line in search of the woman he loves.

And I've been moving on autopilot, unable to think of anything other than the danger the two most important people in my life are in.

Through all his faults, Damon is still my best friend in every sense. Being born so close together gave us a bond most siblings wouldn't understand, and that was before our father did everything he could to drive us apart but only managed to strengthen our bond.

And then there's Chloe. The girl I loved before I understood what love was. The woman I always knew would be my wife one day, even in the years I spent wondering if I'd ever see her again.

When Rocco and Remy find us on the edge of the road, one of them guides Kingston to the SUV, while the other retrieves a feral Ryker from the forest.

His pupils are blown when they meet mine, his body vibrating with barely contained violence, and it almost occurs to me to feel sorry for Sebastian for the pain he's about to be inflicted with.

Until I remember he has the answers, and then I start wondering if Ryker will let me help torture the motherfucker.

I don't know how long we're in the car for before we pull up outside an old cabin with vines climbing the walls and a layer of moss covering the roof.

To his credit, Sebastian didn't make a peep during the drive, or at least not one I heard, and it's not until Remy is lugging him toward the front door of the cabin that I realize I'm the only one left in the car.

I'm not sure what it is about losing her this time that's hit me so differently, or if it's because Damon is missing too, but I need to get my shit together.

I need to be ready when it's time to bring them home.

Shoving the door open, I trail after them and into the dark cabin. There's a single light hanging from the middle of the room with a chair sitting beneath it.

Remy and Rocco make quick work of securing Sebastian, while Ryker lays out a pouch of knives I've never seen before on the only other piece of furniture in the place, a small table pushed against the wall.

My eyes move over the dark space until I meet Kingston's broken gaze.

One of the things I remember most from my childhood was how much I looked up to him. He wasn't a constant presence in our lives, but whenever he was around, he radiated strength. Not in the toxic way so many men in the mafia do, because his strength didn't come from his brutality or how many hours he spent in the gym. It came from within.

A steady presence that never wavered. I remember thinking that one day I wanted to be like him, and seeing him break doesn't change that.

It only proves that he's not like the other men I grew up around.

I cross the room without thought and don't pause until I'm standing in front of him, my chest aching from the constant pressure of losing Chloe again.

"King," I murmur, dragging his attention to me. "We're going to find them."

"You don't know that," he rumbles.

I glance at Ryker and the large knife he’s examining before dropping a hand to Kingston’s shoulder. “You think that crazy motherfucker is going to let her go?”

His dark eyes meet mine, but he doesn’t reply right away. Instead, he holds my gaze for long seconds, searching for doubt but when he doesn’t find any, he gives me a jerky nod and tugs his phone out of his pocket.

“I’m going to make some calls.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

# RYKER

### NOW

The monster pushes at my skin, desperate to be allowed to take control.

In any other circumstance I would let him out, giving him free rein to cause this asshole as much pain as possible, but I have to play this smart.

Not because I want to torture him for weeks on end, although I do, but because I need him to be able to talk.

I need him to tell me where my girl is and that means I have to rein myself in, even when every instinct I have screams to force as much pain as possible on the man responsible for her abduction.

Dragging my thumb along the blade, I revel in the bite of pain when it slices into my skin.

Perfect.

A sharp knife is best when working on someone you want to keep alive for the time being, even if a blunt blade makes them scream louder.

I step up in front of Sebastian, glancing at the binds around his wrists and ankles. It's rare I work with the team, normally preferring to work alone, but they're efficient, I'll give them that.

Remy leans against the wall by the door, his eyes locked on the floor at his feet while Rocco steps out into the cold early morning air. It won't be long before the sun rises, and I want answers before that happens.

His dull green eyes glare up at me, and for the first time I allow myself to take him in. Normally I've had days to observe my victims. I've trailed them, learned everything about them, right down to the freckle on the back of their neck.

It's rare that I get someone in the hot seat without some level of understanding of what makes them tick, but I'm nothing if not resourceful.

I don't say a word as I slice through his suit, leaving it in a pile of fabric around his bound body. It's more unnerving this way, and if you can make them talk first, you've got them exactly where you want them, and Sebastian doesn't disappoint.

"You're going to pay for this," he spits.

I chuckle, sliding the blade through the waistband of his slacks. "Do you know how many times I've heard those words, Vega? I've been doing this a long time. You're going to have to get real creative if you want to hit me with a threat I've never heard before."

His glare falters for a fraction of a second, but the mask that comes from years in a crime family slips into place as quickly as I can blink. "You don't scare me."

I sigh. "I've heard that one too, bud. You guys have got to get a little more imaginative."

On any other day, one of my favorite parts of killing the assholes that find themselves in front of me is the mental toll being tortured takes on them. Chatting to them as if I'm not slicing chunks of flesh from their body.

Today won't be one of those days.

Not when Chloe is in danger.

The thought of my siren makes my chest tighten. Not knowing if she's okay is making me sick to my fucking stomach.

Once I have all his clothes pooled around him and he's left in nothing but a pair of too-tight boxer briefs, I stand back and assess my options.

Sometimes a blank canvas can feel overwhelming, but not today.

Today I'm itching to start. Itching to feel this asshole's blood on my hands and have his screams fill my ears.

"You're wasting your time. I'm not going to tell you shit."

I scoff. "That's what they all say, but let me tell you a little secret." I lean in close until my face is so close our noses almost touch. "I've never walked away without answers, and I don't intend to start today."

Without giving him a chance to respond, I glide the blade over his thigh, slicing lightly and reveling as blood pools around the wound.

It's not much, but that's by design.

I can't have him passing out on me just yet.

Not until he tells me where my woman is.

Sebastian hisses out a breath of pain, his muscles locking up as he forces himself to appear unbothered.

I work in silence, cutting into his flesh over and over until his blood drips onto the wooden floors.

To his credit, he does a decent job of controlling his pain, but that's about to change.

"Ronan," I call over my shoulder and he appears beside me a moment later.

"How can I help?"

"Can you boil the kettle for me?"

"Feel like a cup of tea?" He smirks.

"Not quite."

He disappears to the other side of the room, where a stove and a tiny basin sit in the corner.

"Do you know what happens when you pour boiling water onto fresh cuts, Vega?" I ask conversationally. "It destroys the healthy skin cells around the cuts and makes healing almost impossible. So if you happen to walk out of here alive, you'll probably lose your legs once the infection sets in. Is that something you're willing to risk?"

"You're bluffing," he spits.

"Am I?" I raise a brow, tugging my phone out of my pocket. "It's been a little while but let me see if I can find the photos."

Scrolling through my camera roll, I ignore the photos of Chloe I've taken over the last few months, candid moments I couldn't let myself forget. The jump from her smiling face to gory wounds and bloody bodies is swift and I make a mental note to myself to move these photos onto a different phone. I don't want her to accidentally stumble across them and I'll never be the kind of guy to hide my phone from my woman.

Chloe will never have any doubts about my devotion to her.

I find the photos I'm looking for and turn the device around for Sebastian to see my handiwork. Earl Branding was a sick son of a bitch that deserved every second of agony I inflicted on him, and I kept the

motherfucker alive as long as I could while inflicting as much pain on him as possible.

Sebastian's eyes widen slightly before looking away from the grotesque image.

"Is that what you want, Sebby? Do you want to feel unimaginable pain that lasts for days on end and has no chance of healing? Just for fun I'd probably reapply the boiling water every twelve hours or so, just to destroy as much of that good tissue as I can, as well as any other places my knives have cut up in that time."

"I'm not a snitch," he growls.

"I don't really care what you want to call yourself so you can sleep at night, Vega. What I do care about is you telling me where my woman is. All of this stops if you give me what I need to know."

"You're saying I'll walk out of here alive if I tell you?"

"Free and clear," I lie. This asshole has been on our radar for a long time and definitely fits into the kinds of people we rid the world of, but I'm not going to tell him that if he's thinking about giving me the truth.

I might even find it in my heart to give him a quick death if he's helpful enough.

Ronan appears beside me with a stovetop kettle in his hand, steam billowing from the spout and I can't help but chuckle as Sebastian's eyes widen.

"What's it going to be, Vega?"

He's about to fold like a house of goddamn cards.

Whoever he's working with should have thought twice about trusting a weasel like him, because if given half the chance, he was always going to cross them.

That's how scum like him survive.

"There's a farmhouse twenty miles north from the motel. I'll give you the coordinates. There are five guards there at all times, but she's staying an hour away from here in some fancy hotel."

"She?" Ronan and I ask at the same time.

"Mikayla. My family has always had ties to people in high places. It's why Lombardi was desperate to marry one of his sons off to the bitch, but she convinced Dad a few years ago to go all in with a global trafficking ring we'd worked with in the past. Guns. Drugs. Organs. People. These people have no limits to what they'll do. She has unlimited resources at her

disposal, and she’s intent on getting revenge for not getting to marry Damon all those years ago.”

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## CHAPTER TEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

Damon hasn’t said a word since Mikayla and her guards disappeared up the stairs, and I can’t say I blame him because I’m equally as speechless.

Learning that Kingston was the one that effectively ended Damon’s engagement to a woman that he couldn’t stand is enough, but the idea of her forcing him to marry her when the sun rises makes my stomach roll.

Because it’s not what he wants.

Things between us are as complicated as they’ve ever been, but that’s not what makes my heart ache for him.

It’s that he won’t have a choice, and that’s all I’ve ever wanted for any of us.

To choose who we get to spend the rest of our lives with.

In the normal world, far from violence and crime, that’s how people do it. Their lives aren’t traded like a commodity for the gain of their family. They get to fall in love and make their own choices and mistakes.

That’s what Damon deserves.

My own internal conflict is enough to take my mind off how severe the pain is, but every now and then the throb brings me right back to the dank basement we’ve found ourselves in and the bullet wound that still hasn’t stopped bleeding.

I know the risks associated with the bullet still being inside me.

I know I'm more prone to infection, and there's a decent chance it finds its way to my heart or some other vital organ, but without so much as a first aid kit, there's not much we can do about it.

Not without risking an infection that could be just as deadly as the bullet itself.

"You know, when I first started icing you out, I would allow my mind to wander to a time when I was the head of the Lombardi family and I made the rules. You'd still be Ronan's, but I thought we'd at least be able to be friends again," he muses from where he's sitting behind me, holding the blood-soaked sweatshirt to his abdomen. "Some days those thoughts were the only thing that made it possible to keep going, the idea that the other part of my heart could one day start beating again."

Tears gather in my eyes, and I bite down on my bottom lip to stop the sob climbing up the back of my throat.

"I thought if I could just make it a few more years. If I could just get through the wedding and take Dad's throne, then it would all be okay. That you'd be happy with my brother, and just being a part of your life would be enough for me, even if you'd never be mine.

"Hurting you was like shoving a hot poker into my chest every time a cruel word fell from my lips, but the only way I could keep you safe was to keep you away from me."

"Damon," I whisper.

"Let me get this out, Duchess." He presses a gentle kiss to the top of my head. "Nothing can excuse the way I treated you or how I handled things, but I just need you to know that every time I broke your heart, I broke mine as well. I tore it straight from my fucking chest the day I started pushing you away, and I don't think it started beating again until these past few weeks.

"I thought once I helped you escape back then that it would be easier to let you go, that knowing you and the baby were safe would make it easier to live without you—"

"Wait, *you* helped me escape?"

He huffs out a laugh, but there's no humor in the sound. "I left the door unlocked and left your shoes by the door. I did what I could to distract the guards so you could get out, and then I just hoped that all those lessons Ronan and me gave you were fresh enough for you to do the rest.

“I can’t take credit for you getting out that night because you did it yourself. You rallied even after watching your parents die. You found the strength and got the fuck out of there. You were, and still are, the strongest person I’ve ever known, and I’m so fucking proud of you for surviving all those years ago.”

A rough sob escapes, my chest aching from the force of it. Maybe I’m hallucinating from the blood loss because that’s the only way I could be hearing these words come from Damon.

“You have always, and will always, be my reason, Duchess. Even when it was easier to hate you. Even when I convinced myself I couldn’t stand to look at you, everything I did was to make it safe for you in the long run. I’m sorry I failed you. I’m sorry I broke both our hearts over and over, and it was all for nothing.”

Scrambling onto my knees before he can stop me, I ignore the intense pain in my abdomen to crawl into his lap, wrapping my arms around his shoulders.

He envelops me in his arms, burying his face on my neck and holds me so tight it hurts. But I don’t pull away. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

Because more than anything during those years we spent apart, all I wanted was a hug from my best friend, from the boy that fought the monsters under my bed when we were kids and beat up the first guy to ever disrespect me at school.

And even if I die down here, even if I say goodbye to him and the other men that hold my heart, I’ll die understanding why he turned on me all those years ago.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# KINGSTON

NOW

Mikayla Vega.

Mafia princess.

Socialite.

And most recently, criminal mastermind.

It took more than an hour to track down Terrance Vega, a feat that should not have been difficult given I have all of his direct lines, including those that connect to his most trusted underbosses and his wife.

But it made sense when I found out he's been missing for the last three months.

No one's seen or heard from him, as if he disappeared in the middle of the night.

At first I thought he just left the country. He wouldn't be the first mafia boss to skip town when shit got heavy, and given the deals he's made over the years, I wouldn't be surprised.

But that possibility was ruled out when I realized none of his accounts have been touched. The ones offshore, the ones stateside. None of them have had even a dollar withdrawn since the day he disappeared.

There's no way Sebastian is running the family, because not only is he an idiot, he can't keep his dick in his pants and his nose away from the blow

for long enough to make it through an hour-long meeting, let alone to run the family.

Which leaves Mikayla.

Once I figured out Terrance was out of the picture, it was easy to put the pieces together and follow the bouncing ball to the person responsible for our current predicament, and I can't help but feel guilty.

I'll never regret saving Damon from a marriage he didn't want, but I am the reason they're missing right now.

Sebastian has filled in some of the gaps while his eyes shifted between Ryker and the kettle of boiling water he hovered over fresh wounds, and while we don't have all the information, things are far more complicated than I first thought.

For a long time, there have been rumblings of an underground market for anything and everything. There doesn't seem to be one single person or group responsible for it, but there's a puppet master behind the scenes pulling the strings.

In the years since they surfaced, we've taken out several men who were providing women for this market with the promise of a significant payday, but they were given such little information that even after weeks of torture, they couldn't give us anything.

The drop-off was always in the middle of nowhere. They weren't given names and they never saw faces, making them useless.

Mikayla working with them is the first solid lead we've ever had.

Corbin does a satellite search of the coordinates Sebastian gave, and there is a farmhouse there. It's abandoned and doesn't appear to have a current owner, making it the perfect place to hide out if you wanted to fly under the radar, but that doesn't guarantee that's where they're keeping Chloe and Damon.

"What do you want to do, boss?" Corbin asks as I pace back and forth across the front of the cabin. No one has been here in years, and I haven't bothered to maintain the place because it gives the impression that someone owns it, but I'm starting to think some landscaping might be necessary after hitting my head on the same branch five times since I stepped outside earlier.

Ryker and Ronan stand with their backs against the door, while Rocco and Remy are keeping Sebastian company.

I’ve always been good at making hard decisions, but the stakes have never been quite this high.

The only thing I know for sure is that time is of the essence because one, or both, of them are injured.

My stomach rolls at the thought of Chloe being hurt, but I shove it to the back of my mind. She needs me to be strong right now. She needs me to be decisive.

“I want a team to check the place out,” I tell him, tugging my phone away from my ear to check the time. “Ronan and Rocco will meet whoever you can organize a mile out from the farmhouse in an hour.”

“Not sending Ry?”

I shake my head as I meet the golden eyes in question. “No, he’ll stay at the cabin with Sebastian. Leaving him unprotected might be what they want, and I refuse to compromise our only bargaining chip.”

“And you know he’ll slaughter anyone that stands between him and your girl.”

“And that.” I chuckle, but I haven’t felt an ounce of humor since I realized they were gone.

“The team is on their way to your location. I’ll reroute them and send you the coordinates.”

“Thanks, Cor.”

“And boss? We’ll get your girl back.”

I end the call, my heart aching for the only woman I’ve ever loved.

I just have to hope we’re not too late.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# DAMON

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

Things have been tense around the compound the last month.

Between Dad barking at anyone who so much as mentions the Weavers and my brother pining over his lost love, it's been hard to get anything done.

But it won't last forever.

I've done my best to keep Ronan off Chloe's trail, but doing that while also ensuring I don't know where she is is more difficult than I would like to admit.

All that matters is that she's safe and can start a new life far away from the family that took everything from her.

My eyes slip closed as soon as I step into the afternoon sun.

I've been working so hard to keep everything on track that I haven't taken the time to take a walk in Mom's garden in weeks. This is one of the only ways I can ground myself, being close to the only two women to ever hold a place in my heart.

When we were kids, Chloe and I used to spend hours out here, running between the rose bushes, cutting ourselves on the thorns and doing our best to hide the evidence from our parents. And then there's Mom, who never lost her kindness, even in a world of snakes.

Part of me is glad she's not here to see how far we've fallen. How heartless I've become. How ruthless Dad is. How Ronan lost his soul the day Chloe got out.

But I miss her.

I miss her quiet strength. The way she always knew exactly what to say when we needed reassurance. And how she loved even in the face of such darkness.

The dense grass sinks beneath my shoes as I walk further into the garden that has a team of gardeners to ensure it remains lush and beautiful all year round, regardless of whether it's rose season or not.

In truth, it's the only way I know my father hasn't completely lost his humanity.

Vibrations in my pocket remind me that although this is the first time I've taken to myself in weeks, I'll never be truly off the clock.

I fish my phone out of the pocket of my sweats and pinch the bridge of my nose when I find Mikayla's name across the screen.

I'll admit I've been avoiding her, but after Chloe escaped, I've needed some time to process my feelings toward the only girl I've ever cared for.

She was never meant to mine, but my heart can't accept that when the organ beats for her.

"Mikayla," I snap down the line. I don't mean to be so harsh with her. It's not her fault we're stuck in an arranged marriage I would rather chew my own arm off than go through with.

"I've been trying to call you for weeks, Damon," she hisses.

If we make it through the first year of marriage without killing each other, I'll be surprised.

"I've been busy. We've talked about this. It's only going to get worse when I take over the family and you need to get used to it. You will never be my priority." It's harsh, but it's the truth. Because the second I take the throne, all that will matter is keeping the Lombardi name at the high standard it's always been.

She's quiet for a beat, and I pull the phone away from my ear to check the call is still connected.

"I need to talk to you about something," she finally says.

"Okay…"

"I don't want to get married."

I scoff. “That makes two of us, but we don’t have much choice in the matter. Or did you forget our parents sold us off before we were even out of diapers?”

“Daddy agrees that it would be better if we don’t go through with the marriage. He’s sending documents to Salvatore now to dissolve the agreement.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out, because I don’t know what the hell to say when she’s giving me the thing I’ve always wanted, a month after the woman that my heart beats for fled the compound.

Her timing is as shitty as she is, it seems.

“Why?”

“I can’t marry someone that will never love me, Damon. And we both know your heart will always belong to someone else.”

It’s not an easy feat to render me speechless, but Mikayla has managed it.

I’m not exactly surprised that she knew I had feelings for Chloe because I did little to hide it when we were younger, but I am surprised that she’s willing to give up being the queen of a family like mine just because I’ll never love her.

Most mafia marriages start as strangers and they learn to love one another over the years. It’s the norm for our world, and Mikayla knows that.

Hell, her parents hated each other for years before their marriage, and they’ve made it more than twenty years without killing one another.

“And your father is okay with this?”

“He was the one that suggested it. He’s willing to negotiate on the deal our fathers made to ensure this won’t ruin anything, but it’s better that we part ways now rather than spend the rest of our lives making each other miserable.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what needs to happen.” She sighs. “Have a nice life, Damon.”

Mikayla ends the call before I can respond, which is likely for the best considering I can barely process what’s just happened.

I should be relieved that I don’t have to marry someone I’ll never love, but all I can think about is how it’s just a little too late.

I’ll never get the chance to tell Chloe all the things I should have said, and somehow I have to learn to live with that.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

A constant sick feeling settles in my stomach alongside the shivering that doesn't stop no matter how warm I am.

Damon's concern radiates off him, but neither of us has acknowledged the fact that if we don't get out of here soon, I'm going to die.

It's a harsh reality, one I'm not ready to accept, but what's the point in burying my head in the sand if these are my last hours on earth?

The sun peeked over the horizon a little while ago, the tiny window on the other side of the basement reminding us that she'll be back soon.

We haven't spoken about her threat, haven't so much as mentioned Damon will be marrying her in just a few hours.

And we definitely haven't spoken about the fact that once he says "I do," she'll have no reason to keep me alive.

My usefulness ends the moment he signs on the dotted line.

I nestle my face in the crook of his neck, desperately seeking his warmth.

"You're awake," he murmurs.

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep, but that's not exactly surprising. Although the bleeding has slowed, it hasn't stopped, and there's a good chance an infection is setting in.

"Don't marry her," I whisper.

“If it’s a choice between her hurting you and marrying her, I’m going to choose the option that keeps you safe, Duchess.” His voice is pained.

“You’re a fool if you think she’s going to let me live.”

He sucks in a breath, clinging to me as tight as I am to him and I revel in the pain his hard grip brings. Because for now, I’m alive. For now, I’m with the boy that got away.

“She knows while I’m alive, she doesn’t have a chance of having all of you, and that’s all she’s ever wanted.”

“She just wants the power.”

“No, she wants you, D. And she doesn’t want to share you.”

“I’ll keep you safe, Duchess. I promise.”

I sigh. He’s not seeing the writing on the wall, and the last thing I want to do is burst his bubble when we have such a short time to enjoy one another. To make up for the years we’ve lost.

“Damon, I need you to do a few things for me.”

“Chloe,” he growls.

“Please just listen,” I whisper. “I need you to make sure they’re okay. I know you hate them. I know Ryker gets on your nerves and you think Kingston killed your mom, but I need you to make sure they don’t get themselves killed. I need you to make sure Ronan doesn’t lose himself.”

He sucks in a harsh breath but lets me continue.

“And I need you to find happiness. Even if it’s with her. I need you to be happy, Damon. I need you to stop living for everyone else and enjoy the life you have left. For me.”

A harsh sob rumbles through his chest as his grip on me tightens, as if holding me will stop the inevitable from becoming true.

“Please don’t do this, Chloe. Please don’t leave me. Please don’t leave us,” he chokes as his tears fall against my throat.

“I don’t think I’m going to have a choice.” I don’t bother wiping my own tears away as they slip down my cheeks, not when I have to get this out. Not when Mikayla could get here any minute.

“They’re coming for us.”

“I’m running out of time. How long do you think I can go with an untreated bullet wound before sepsis kicks in? Before I’ve lost so much blood that my organs start to shut down?”

“We have time.”

“No, we don’t, and that’s okay. Even if it was for a little while, I got to have the four pieces of my heart together, and that’s enough. If I can’t have forever, this was enough.”

A violent shiver radiates through my body, and I burrow deeper into his arms. Unfortunately for me, this isn’t the first time I’ve felt cold to the bones, and it’s certainly not a feeling I wanted to feel ever again.

But at least I’m not alone.

At least I have his arms around me as darkness inches closer.

Damon sobs against my shoulder, and I hold onto him as tightly as I can manage, desperate to stop him from falling apart.

Desperate to stop him from feeling the weight of this loss.

The Lombardi brothers have known enough loss to last them a lifetime. I just hope that losing me isn’t the thing that finally breaks them.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# RONAN

### NOW

It feels significant that Kingston is trusting me on this mission given the stakes.

The woman he loves, that we all love, is in danger, and I'm the one he's sending to retrieve her while he and Ryker stay at the cabin?

That's a big deal, right?

But none of it means anything if I can't bring Chloe and Damon home.

Rocco drives us to the meeting point, not saying a word to me the entire time, and I try not to take it personally.

He was jovial with the others but hasn't bothered to acknowledge my existence since they joined us, and I can't decide if it's because he doesn't like me or if he's just slow warming up to strangers.

Either way, my interpersonal relationships are hardly the biggest issue I have right now.

"Have you worked for Kingston long?" I ask when I can't handle the silence for another second. After being with Chloe and the guys, and before that Ryker for weeks, I'm not used to sitting in complete silence anymore.

"Yep."

"And he's a good boss?"

"Yep."

I huff out a laugh. "You know any other words?"

“Yep.” But this time the corner of his mouth quirks up ever so slightly. If I hadn’t spent my entire adult life assessing body language, I’d likely have missed it, but it’s difficult to get anything past me.

“Have I done something to annoy you?”

He sighs and glances over at me before his eyes settle on the road ahead. “I’m not much of a fan of your family in general.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Like you haven’t done shitty things in the name of the Lombardi family,” he challenges.

“Oh, I absolutely have,” I admit. “But it was never because I wanted to. It was the obligation I had to the legacy I was born into, and as soon as I realized how many lies I’d been fed, I got the fuck out.”

“And your brother?”

I hesitate for a moment, because Damon is a work in progress. He’s got so many faults I stopped making excuses for him years ago, but what Rocco doesn’t understand is how hard it was for Damon to betray the family to help me save Chloe.

It’s been drilled into him since the day he was born that his responsibility was to the family above all else. He’s never been allowed to want anything, to be anything, that isn’t the heir to the throne.

And that’s not the easy life it seems like.

If one of us got off easy, it was me. I was allowed to love who I wanted to love. I was allowed to go to college and get an education, even if it was one to help the family, and when I walked away with the love of my life in my arms, the only thing I was leaving behind was a father that didn’t love me and a brother that chose his path.

“I don’t want to speak for him, but I can tell you with absolute certainty that there’s no one in the world that hates my father more than Damon.”

He grunts in reply and leans back in his seat.

It’s not my job to justify the things Damon has done in the Lombardi name, and right now all that matters is getting them back, because let’s be honest.

If I don’t bring Chloe home, Ryker is going to kill me, and after seeing the way he was with Sebastian, I really don’t want to get on the wrong end of his knife collection.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

I must lose consciousness again because I'm startled awake by the door above the stairs slamming open.

Damon's arms flex around me for a beat before he carefully slips me off his lap and props me against the wall.

By the time our visitors reach the bottom step, he's positioned in front of me, blocking them from view.

My skin is sticky with sweat despite how cold it is down here, and each breath rattles painfully through my chest.

I'm dying.

I know because I've felt like this before. I've felt as if the life slowly fades away and blissful darkness beckons me.

The difference is that I don't want to die this time.

When I almost bled out in Kingston's arms ten years ago, my heart was broken and my mind was filled with horrors I didn't want to spend the rest of my life reliving.

I would have welcomed death.

But it's different now.

I'm so close to having everything I've ever wanted. My heart is full for the first time in my life, and it feels cruel for it to be ripped away from me like this.

Even if it is my time, even if death drags me kicking and screaming to the other side, at least I felt what it was like to be loved by them.

I've never given much thought about the afterlife. Whether it's heaven and hell waiting for me, or if I'll be reincarnated into another body, destined to live a new life a world away from this one.

But I suppose it doesn't matter what's on the other side, only that I'll be leaving this world with so many things unsaid.

I'm dragged from my thoughts by heels clicking on the stairs, and a violent shiver vibrates through my bones.

Dying at any time would suck, but dying in a basement while being held hostage by Mikayla fucking Vega is a level of cruelty no one deserves.

We couldn't stand each other as kids, and I sure as hell can't stand her as an adult who has plotted to hurt the men I love.

Damon's body does little to shield me from the huge tulle monstrosity she's wearing, her hair and makeup done to perfection.

She doesn't spare me a glance, which is probably a good thing because I have no control of my reactions, and even while biting down on the inside of my cheek, I'm desperate to giggle at how ridiculous she looks in a dank basement in a dress that probably cost as much as most people's homes.

The guard in front of her throws a bag in front of Damon. "Change into this."

"I'm not marrying you, Mikayla," he snaps. "And do you really want a husband that you had to blackmail?"

"I want the Lombardi name. The man attached to it is irrelevant." Her eyes flicker over his shoulder to me, and her sneer makes my stomach roll. I've never been comfortable with people hating me. Not when I was a child or a teenager, and not even now as an adult. But the way Mikayla hates me is different, and it makes my skin crawl. "Your whore isn't looking too good, Damon. The quicker you say 'I do,' the quicker she gets medical attention. Are you going to let her die just to avoid marrying me?"

Damon reaches for the bag and my chest aches. "Get the doctor here as soon as possible. I'm not saying shit until I know she's going to be taken care of as soon as it's done."

"Damon," I whimper. "Don't."

He turns slightly, agony etched into his features. "I'm not letting you die because of me, Chloe. I've caused you too much pain already. I won't be responsible for your death as well."

Mikayla snickers. “God, you two are disgusting. The way you and your brother fawned all over her was always gross, but it’s just pathetic now that you’re an adult.”

“Just because no one is ever going to love you doesn’t make it gross, Mikayla,” he snaps, and my chest tightens for a whole new reason.

Hearing that word come from Damon felt impossible a few weeks ago. Even if a part of me would always love him, I never expected him to reciprocate those feelings.

It figures he’d admit it when I was on the brink of death.

A high-pitched laugh fills the basement, and I flinch at the sound. Can’t she just let me die in peace without her presence tainting my trip to the eternal plane?

“Pathetic. I used to think you were a born leader like your father, but it turns out you’re just as weak as your brother.” She steps closer to us. “I will not hesitate to torture her until she dies right in front of you, Damon. Don’t test me. Get dressed, and be ready in ten. I’ll call the doctor once you’ve signed on the dotted line, and then we can get out of this dump.”

“I’m not leaving with you until I’ve seen with my own eyes that she’s okay.”

“Then you’ll watch as I slit her throat.” She shrugs and turns on her sky-high heels, lifting the bottom of her dress as she walks up the steps with the guard trailing behind her. “Oh, and Damon?” She waits until he meets her eyes, and I see the evil behind the brown pools. “I will expect to consummate our marriage before she’ll be given any medical attention.”

She disappears before he can respond, and honestly, that’s probably for the best, because the tension vibrating through every muscle is enough to tell me he’s about to lose his mind.

The door at the top of the stairs slams shut with a decisive lock a moment later, once again leaving us alone.

Damon doesn’t turn around for long minutes, and I start to wonder if he’s gone into shock. I wouldn’t blame him. The last twelve hours have been enough to put just about anyone on the floor, but I need him to keep it together.

I’m fading more by the minute, and if he wants any chance of getting out of this without a new wife, I need him to rally because I can’t.

“Damon,” I murmur, trying to get his attention without startling him.

His shoulders fall at the sound of his name on my lips, and he turns slowly, giving me a clear view of the devastation in his eyes.

“I can’t do this,” he whispers.

“I know,” I choke out. “And I don’t want you to. I need you to get out of here alive and without an evil bitch as a wife, and that means letting her kill me.”

“No.”

“Damon, please.”

“I will not watch you die, Chloe,” he snaps. “Marrying her is a small price to pay if it means you live.”

I force a breath into my aching lungs. “By the time she calls a doctor, I’ll already be dead. She’s not going to let me live when I’ll always be a threat to her, and you’re delusional if you think she will. She’s just using me as leverage to make you comply, but as soon as you sign the marriage certificate, she’ll either kill me herself or she’ll leave me here to die.”

His eyes fall closed as a violent tremble moves through his body. “I’m sorry I’m always failing you, Duchess. I’m sorry I’ve never been able to keep you safe. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“I know,” I whisper, reaching a hand out to him in the hope he’ll move closer and he doesn’t disappoint.

He drops to his knees in front of me, his fingers intertwining with mine while his other hand cups my cheek. “You’re burning up.”

“I know,” I sigh. “Even if she does call a doctor, I think it’s too late.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m just being practical, D. If she does keep her word, she’ll wait until there’s nothing a single doctor in the middle of nowhere can do. Mikayla’s a lot of things, but stupid isn’t one.”

“So it seems,” he rumbles, dropping his forehead to press against mine. “I’m sorry I wasted all those years hating you. I thought I was keeping you safe, but all I was doing was making us both miserable.”

“Just promise me you won’t waste any more of your life,” I murmur. “Promise me you’ll live for more than the Lombardi throne and keeping everyone else safe.”

He nods. “I promise.”

My eyes fall closed, and for a moment, I let my mind wander to what could have been but never was. To the life with four men that love me and a

houseful of pets for us to corral. And to a lifetime of possibilities I'll never get to see.

But maybe that's okay. Because at least I've known how it feels to love and be loved.

Maybe that's enough for this lifetime.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# DAMON

### NOW

Chloe's body slumps against the wall, and I carefully lay her down on her side, covering her with my clothes as I change into the suit from the bag the guard threw at me.

A war rages inside me, and for the first time in my life, I'm not sure what to do. I don't know whether to hope Mikayla was telling the truth when she said she would get Chloe medical attention as soon as we were married, or if every word out of her mouth has been a lie.

I wouldn't put it past her. She's been manipulating everyone around her since she was old enough to walk, but I refuse to risk Chloe.

Glancing over my shoulder, my chest tightens at the sight of her. She's so pale I've checked her pulse three times since I laid her down and her breathing is labored.

I've seen enough people die to know what it looks like, but I refuse to accept that as Chloe's fate.

Not when Ronan just got her back after years of searching. Not when Kingston and Ryker will almost certainly kill me if I survive and she dies. And not when I've finally stopped fighting this thing between us.

I haven't even had a chance to treat her right yet. I can't lose her.

Once my tie is secured around my neck, I crouch beside her, brushing damp hair from her cheek.

The boy that's been protecting her since he was old enough to understand what that meant is desperate to save her, but for the first time in his life, he doesn't know how to do it.

When she saw me kill our gardener and my father threatened her life for the first time, I knew what I had to do. I had to distance myself from her. I had to make her hate me.

When he was about to kill her, I knew I had to get her out of the compound by any means necessary, and when Ralph almost raped her, I did the same thing again.

I've always known what to do to keep her safe.

But not this time.

This time I feel more helpless than I have in all my life.

I don't know how to get her out of here alive, especially seeing as I don't know where we are, and I have no way to call for backup.

The sound of the door opening at the top of the stairs makes my chest tighten, but I don't look up, don't look away from the woman I spent too long pushing away.

"Time to go, Lombardi," the guard from before announces.

"Is the doctor here?"

"Boss gave you her conditions."

"And I gave her mine," I snap. "I want a doctor here before I'm going anywhere near an altar."

"What makes you think you get to call the shots?"

"The fact that this whole plan goes to shit if she doesn't get my signature." I finally stand, putting my larger frame between him and my girl. "If Chloe dies before we can say 'I do,' Mikayla has no leverage. What's she going to do? Threaten to kill me? Threaten to torture me?" I huff out a laugh. "None of it is going to matter because if Chloe dies, I'll be more than willing to follow her into the next life."

He stares at me, like he's not quite sure what to make of me, but eventually he sighs and pulls his phone out before holding it to his ear.

A voice comes down the line, and he quickly replies, "Get the doctor here now."

Ending the call before they can respond, he raises a brow. "Let's go. He'll be here by the time you get through your vows."

"I'm not leaving her down here alone."

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Bring her up. I don’t give a fuck as long as you get up those goddamn stairs.”

I turn around and carefully bundle Chloe against my chest, doing my best not to jostle her too much. The more she’s moved around, the further the bullet could travel, and the only reason I still have hope of getting her out of here alive is because it hasn’t made it to any of her vital organs yet.

Right now it’s just blood loss and infection we’re working against, but as soon as the bullet gets near her heart or lungs, it’s all over.

Once she’s settled in my arms, I press a kiss to her temple, reveling in the way she feels against me before following the guard upstairs.

Stepping into the run-down hallway, I glance both ways before following the guard further into the house.

Getting shot in the back is only going to mean Chloe never gets to see a doctor and she never has a chance to survive, so I play it smart.

I play the long game.

Ignoring the fact that I’ve been playing the long game for fifteen years, I tighten my hold on Chloe and breathe her in, soaking in what could be the last moments with her.

All those years wasted thinking I was doing the right thing.

I step through the doorway into what I think may have been a dining room once upon a time, but the filthy lace curtains and peeling floral wallpaper are the only signs of what used to be. Instead of a table and chairs, there’s a makeshift altar with green and white florals, just like she chose for our wedding ten years ago.

She always has had a flair for the dramatic, I guess some things don’t change.

Mikayla is blessedly absent, which gives me a chance to find an armchair that looks newer than anything else in the house, not a difficult feat I’ll admit, and carefully place Chloe into it.

She hasn’t regained consciousness, and I try not to let it worry me. I’m doing everything I can to get her seen by a doctor, everything else is out of my control.

Or at least that’s what I tell myself to settle the guilt eating its way through my chest.

“It’s going to be okay, Duchess. I’ll get you out of here.” I whisper the promise I have no way of keeping but I hope like hell I can.

My bride's shrill voice bounces off the walls, and I shove to my feet before she can catch me with Chloe. The last thing I want to do is piss her off before the doctor gets here.

As soon as there's someone here to help her, I'll be more than happy to slaughter every single person in the house, Mikayla included. But until that moment, I'll play their games and pretend to follow their every order.

She appears in the doorway with a sneer, her eyes finding mine immediately.

"Something wrong, Mik?"

"Don't call me that!" she snaps.

"It wouldn't be a nickname if you were the one that chose it."

She stamps her foot like a petulant child and storms further into the room. "Good to know you're just as insufferable as you were when we were nineteen."

I smirk. "What's got you throwing a tantrum, Mikayla?"

She's worked up about something else right now, and if she's anything like she was when we were younger, she'll want to bitch about it before she does anything else.

"I can't get ahold of your father."

I nod slowly. "I see. And what were you hoping to speak to him about?"

"I need his agreement that he will recognize our marriage as per the original terms of our contract that was dissolved."

I stare at her for long seconds. "Are you telling me that you orchestrated my kidnapping with the intention of marrying me before you bothered to check Salvatore was still willing to honor a contract that *you* broke?"

"Not by choice," she growls.

"Even if you had a gun to your head when you made that call, my father would not accept that as a reason to break a contract that had been in place for years."

"I had his blessing before you decided to defect from the family. I need to make sure he'll still give you the throne and therefore make me queen," she huffs. "Plus kidnapping you was a happy coincidence while trying to kill Kingston."

I'm about to tell her that it wouldn't have mattered how many connections she had, that killing Kingston Beaumont would have been close to impossible, especially with that overgrown tattooed asshole by his side,

but I’m cut off when two guards appear in the doorway with their guns drawn.

“We gotta go,” one of them says.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“We’ve been compromised.”

A slow smile tugs at my lips. I should have known it wouldn’t take them long to find us. Not with how obsessed they each are with our girl.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# RONAN

### NOW

Clutching my gun in my hand, I move closer to the house with Rocco on my six.

He may not be my biggest fan, but he's committed to bringing Chloe home, and that's all that matters right now.

The fact his boss is just as obsessed with her as I am is certainly coming in handy right now.

Ryker's voice fills my earpiece. "I want to know the second you have eyes on our girl, Lombardi."

I roll my eyes but the corners of my lips quirk up. "I already told you that you'll be the first to know."

"Do not compromise our mission with your chatting," Rocco snaps, and I snicker. Perhaps he just doesn't care for other people in general outside of his found family.

"I haven't missed this," Corbin snarks. I haven't formally met the guy, but I have a feeling we're going to get along. "Thermal imaging indicates that there are ten people in the house. Presumably Chloe and Damon, along with eight targets."

Rocco and I are approaching from the rear of the property, but without floor plans, we have no idea where they'll be keeping them.

“There’s a target walking the perimeter, one hundred yards from your position, Rocco.”

“I have eyes on him,” he murmurs, raising his weapon toward a guy in all black that I hadn’t clocked.

I’m highly trained and have been since I was sixteen, but this guy is showing me up, and on any other day I would take offense to that. But today? Today I just want to get Chloe and Damon and get the fuck out of here.

I need the five of us back together and safe like we were at the cabin.

And then we need to figure out how we’re going to take out my father and anyone else that wishes us harm.

Two silenced shots fill my ears a moment before the guards drop between the weeds that surround the property.

This place looks just as poorly kept as the cabin King and Ryker are waiting at, and I didn’t think that was possible.

“Team A in position,” Rocco says once we reach the back fence and have a clear view of the entire back of the house.

“Team B is in position.”

“There’s movement at the front of the property,” Corbin tells us. “Hold.”

I drag in a rough breath, my heart beating harder than it ever has on a mission. Even the first time my father thrust a gun into my hand and shoved me into a highly volatile situation, I was calm, but once again, the stakes have never been this high.

My reason for breathing is inside, and I don’t think I’ll survive losing her again.

“Two guards and a woman are moving toward a car. What do you want us to do?” Team B asks.

“Leave them,” Kingston orders. “Your only objective is getting Chloe and Damon by any means necessary. Them leaving just makes that job easier.”

I want to argue with him, want to insist that we take Mikayla out while we can, but he’s right. We still have five people inside to take out, and that needs to be our priority.

“I’ll keep eyes on the car. You’re cleared for entry in five…four…three…two…one, and go!” Corbin orders, and we’re moving immediately.

Weapons drawn, we move toward the house with our eyes moving across the space in front of us. Even with Corbin's support, I'm not willing to get myself shot during a rescue mission.

We reach the back door at the same time the front door slams open and gunfire ensues, allowing us to enter almost undetected. Rocco and I slip inside, immediately taking out the two guards by the back door.

The farmhouse is just as run-down on the inside as it appeared from outside, and I tamp down the rage in my gut that Chloe has been being kept here.

Once all of this is over, she'll never know another moment of discomfort.

We'll give her the life she deserves, the life we dreamed of all those years ago, even if there will be three extra men to deal with.

At least that will mean she never has to be alone. She'll always have one of us with her, will always be protected. She'll never want for anything again.

My eyes scan over the filthy kitchen and spot an open doorway. "Cover me," I say to Rocco, my gun drawn as I move closer.

"There are three bodies in the room to the right of where you entered." Corbin's voice comes through the earpiece.

"Copy that."

I drag in an unsteady breath and shove the door open, almost knocking the guard over with the force.

Rocco gets off a shot, and a moment later I'm stepping over the body. As little as he seems to like me, he's a hell of a lot more useful than any of the men that work for my father.

Relief slams into me when I find Damon kneeling across the room in front of an old armchair, but it's immediately overwhelmed by dread when I see his face.

See the devastation written over his features.

The tears falling against his cheeks.

I rush to him, and it's not until I'm right beside him that my suspicions are confirmed.

Chloe's curled up in the chair, her skin pale and lifeless as her labored breathing fills the space between them.

"I'm sorry," Damon chokes. "I'm so fucking sorry."

The vise around my lungs makes it impossible to speak, impossible to move as I stare down at the woman I've loved all my life.

The one bright light in a never-ending darkness, the person that gave me a reason to live even in the darkest of nights.

Dull green eyes flick up to meet mine, and my chest cracks all over again.

"Ro," she whispers.

"I'm here, Sparrow. I'm here. We're going to get you to the hospital and get you all fixed up."

She shakes her head. "It's too late."

"Lombardi, have you got our girl?" Ryker's voice fills my earpiece.

I hesitate for a moment before tapping the button. "I've got her and Damon. I need a car out the front right now."

"What's going on?" Kingston demands.

"Chloe needs a hospital. Get me a fucking car," I snap.

Shoving the dread as far down as I can, I push my brother out of the way and scoop Chloe into my arms. She's hot despite the chill in the air, and I try to ignore the anxiety that slams into my chest.

She is not dying today.

It's not a fucking option.

"Car's coming down the driveway now," Corbin tells us. "King and Ryker are on their way to the closest hospital. Tim has the coordinates patched into the GPS already."

I don't bother responding as I push past Rocco and move toward the front door. The gunfire was over almost as quickly as it started, and I'm careful not to trip over any of the bodies.

Not while I'm holding precious cargo.

I step into the cool morning air at the same time an SUV stops at the bottom of the worn wooden steps, and I waste no time tugging the back door open and carefully clipping Chloe in.

Damon opens the door across from me and climbs inside, immediately scooting close to her.

As difficult as it is to drag myself away from them, I force my feet to move. I can't afford to shut down right now, no matter how hard it is to make myself get into the driver's seat and peel away from the shitty farmhouse.

Once we’re on the road, I glance into the rearview mirror and find Damon’s forehead pressed to hers as he whispers something I can’t hear.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

He shakes his head but doesn’t unwind himself from around Chloe. “No.”

“Why are you in a suit?”

“Mikayla was planning to force me to marry her.”

I lift a brow but he continues before I can ask any follow-up questions. “She said she would get Chloe a doctor if I signed the marriage certificate.”

“You were going to marry Mikayla to save Chloe?”

He huffs out a laugh and presses a kiss to the top of her head. “Haven’t you realized by now that I would do *anything* to save her?”

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# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# CHLOE

## THEN
## ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Tension bleeds through the compound in a way I can't remember it ever doing before.

Everyone is on edge, and my anxiety peaks every time I have to leave my family's wing because I have no idea what waits for me around each corner.

Especially Salvatore.

He's never particularly liked me, and I gave up trying to convince him I'm worthy of his son a long time ago because unlike with Damon, he doesn't have a say in who Ronan spends his life with.

After the first time he floated marrying me off to another mafia family, my father told me that there was a clause in his contract with Caroline's family that he would have no say in who any subsequent children would marry if he chose to arrange a marriage for their eldest. He thinks if he can get me out of the picture that Ronan will finally be free to marry whoever he chooses, but he clearly doesn't know his youngest son as well as he thinks he does if he believes that to be the case.

I shouldn't be out tonight, shouldn't have even entertained the idea of leaving my bedroom, but when your whole life is monitored and there's

little opportunity to deviate from the plan that was set for you, acts of rebellion are the only way to spread your wings, even just for a little while.

Despite being a senior, I've never been to a high school party. I wouldn't consider my parents as strict, because they've always given me every chance to make decisions for myself where they could, but they're right when they say it's not safe, because not only am I the daughter of Salvatore Lombardi's most trusted soldier, I'm for all intents and purposes his daughter-in-law, and that makes me a target.

I tug the bottom of my dress down as I step onto the back lawn. The garage is off the main house, but I'll raise too many questions if I go that way, so I've opted to take the long way around.

The balmy Florida night wraps around me as I glance up at the sky. We're far enough away from the heart of Miami that the stars aren't diluted by light, and if I'm honest, that's one of the best parts of living on the Lombardi property.

Right alongside living in the same house as my boyfriend, who is going to be all kinds of pissed off when he finds out I snuck out without telling him.

I've never kept a secret from Ronan before, but when we were invited out tonight and he immediately said we were busy when he knew I'd be sitting home by myself, that streak of rebellion stuck its head out, and I knew this is something I had to do.

I don't want to graduate high school and be the only person who never went to a party, and this is a rare night where one falls at the same time as my boyfriend, father, and most of the guards are on a job.

Some would say the stars are aligning.

I snicker to myself as I round the back of the house and come to a stop when I spot Salvatore in the garage with a man on his knees before him.

He has a gun clutched in his hands, but it's only when the moon peeks out from behind a cloud that I notice the blood soaking the concrete beneath them.

Fuck.

After weeks of avoiding being anywhere near the man that rules the family with an iron fist, I've accidentally stumbled upon something I'm pretty sure I shouldn't be seeing.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek and take a step back.

This was a bad idea.

I should have done as I said I was going to and spent the night with a face mask and a reality television show.

Glancing over my shoulder, a sigh of relief lets loose when I realize I'm just a few steps from being concealed by the house.

If I can just make it around the corner, I can get back to my bedroom without anyone ever realizing I was ever out here.

A gunshot slices through the quiet night, and a small gasp escapes my throat, pulling the attention of the most terrifying man I've ever met.

His eyes meet mine, and I watch as a cruel smirk tugs at his lips.

I haven't seen a genuine smile on the man's face since I was a child, but he's far from being happy to see me.

He strides toward me with a confidence one can only gain from always being the most important man in the room, and no matter how loud my mind screams at me to run, I'm rooted in place in stupid high-heeled boots I thought were adorable before I left the safety of my bedroom.

Now they're a liability because even if I had a chance to run, I wouldn't make it very far in these things.

"What are you doing out here, Chloe?" he asks on his approach.

"I was going to a party," I reply honestly. Lying is pointless when I'm dressed in a dress this short with a face full of makeup and my hair curled around my face the way I only do for special events.

The humidity in Florida makes keeping your hair the way you want it difficult, and I rarely have the time or patience.

His head tilts as he drags his eyes over my body. I force myself to remain perfectly still even when my arms itch to cover myself.

I'm never wearing anything this revealing again.

I'm never leaving my room again after the sun goes down.

You know what, maybe I won't leave by myself ever again.

"It's rather stupid for a girl like you to be out all by herself," he muses. "Anything could happen to you, and your parents would think you were just like every other silly high school girl that snuck out and got herself kidnapped."

I open my mouth to reply, to beg for him to let me go back to our wing and forget any of this happened, but I couldn't get a word out even if I wanted to.

"Your existence becomes more and more irritating by the day, but between my sons and your naive father, they won't let me rid the family of

you.”

Swallowing heavily, I force a breath into my lungs as I fight to remain calm.

“But here you are. No one knows where you are. You’ve done the hardest part for me, and all I would have to do is put a bullet through your head and throw you over the wall for the gators to deal with. By the time anyone thinks to look around the property, you’d be long gone.”

I could scream, but what good is it going to do? No one is going to help me, no matter how innocent I am in this situation.

The only thing I’ve done wrong is love his son.

“Please,” I whisper.

He chuckles, but there’s no humor in the sound, only cruelty. “So weak. Just like my son when it comes to you. You make him soft in a world he can’t afford to be anything other than ruthless.”

I open my mouth to reply but quickly snap it shut again. It’s not like I can refute his claims when he’s right. Ronan is soft when it comes to me. He treats me like I’m his entire world, like I’m the sun in his sky, and denying it would be pointless.

I barely notice his hand moving before I’m shoved against the side of the house with his grip around my throat so tight I can barely suck in a breath.

Tears fall against my cheeks even as I curse myself for it. He’s right. I am weak. Years of training. Years of drills to ensure I could get away if I were ever cornered, and here I am. Frozen.

Maybe it’s because I’ve never actually faced danger like this, or maybe it’s the fact that I can’t fight without even harsher repercussions. No one is going to believe Salvatore threatened me, and if I happen to get a hit in, he’ll have reason to kill me without even having to hide it.

Stars blur my vision as he presses harder against my throat, cutting off my air supply.

Panic and acceptance wash over me at the same time. All the things I never got to do and everything I took for granted fill my mind as the darkness creeps closer, beckoning me.

“My son will be better off with you gone. He’ll see.” He’s not speaking to me anymore, instead musing to himself as he watches the light fade from my eyes.

I allow them to fall closed and my body to slump. Death will be more peaceful if I let it happen rather than fighting it.

Or at least that's what I tell myself as my mind wanders to my final moments with Ronan. The way his fingers brushed through my hair, how his breath felt against my cheek as he laughed at something stupid I said. How his warmth brought a peace to my mind that nothing else has ever been able to.

If nothing else, at least I knew what it felt like to be loved.

Just as my mind begins to fade, Salvatore's hold is torn from me, causing me to drop to my knees.

Agony burns through my lungs with every breath that forces its way in as my hands grip my throat. The feel of his hands is still there even if he's not holding me anymore, and if by some miracle I survive, I'm not sure I'll ever stop feeling his hands around my throat.

Swiping at the tears soaking my cheeks, I try to force my eyes open but I can't see through the fog.

"Are you fucking crazy?" a familiar voice snaps. "You've hardly made your dislike for her a secret. Did you think that Neil wouldn't catch on when they couldn't find her? That *Ronan* wouldn't realize you had something to do with it?"

"This is none of your business," Salvatore argues.

"This is absolutely my business because something like this destroys a family, *Dad."* Damon hasn't sounded anything other than mean when I've been around for almost two years, and yet I don't think I've ever heard him sound quite so menacing.

I finally manage to force my eyes open, grateful for the clouds that cover the moon because the headache pressing between my eyes is almost unbearable.

Damon stands chest to chest with his father, rage vibrating through his every muscle and I can't seem to take my eyes off him.

Maybe it's because you should never take your eyes off the most dangerous person in the room, or perhaps it's that he's defending me after spending so much time pretending to hate me.

"She's just a girl."

"No. She's your underboss's daughter and the love of your son's life. Whether you like it or not, you kill Chloe, and you'll have a mutiny on your hands."

“Only if you tell them,” he challenges.

He scoffs. “I won’t need to tell them because you’ll be the first place they look.”

Vibrant blue eyes move from his father and pin me in place. Something a lot like concern flickers through his gaze, but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

“Go back to your room, Chloe. Do not come out under any circumstances. Do not tell *anyone* about this, or next time I’ll let him follow through with his threats.”

I only hesitate for a second before pushing myself to my feet. Stars burst into my vision, but I stumble forward, desperate to get away as quickly as possible.

It’s not until I’m almost at the side door I snuck out of that I turn back in time to see Salvatore strike his son, the sound of the punch amplified through the silent night.

He takes two more hits before I slip through the doorway, my stomach rolling with horror at everything that’s happened in the last ten minutes.

By the time I make it to my bedroom and have the door closed behind me, violent sobs rack through my body, tearing from my burning throat until my legs will no longer hold me.

How am I supposed to keep living in this house, in this family, when it’s clear I’ll always have a target on my head?

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# RYKER

### NOW

I swear to God I'm never letting Chloe out of my sight again.

I'm retiring from killing because I don't think I'll ever be able to leave my siren alone or trust her safety with any of these other assholes she's so attached to.

They clearly cannot be trusted, and I won't be making the same mistake again.

The only reason I relinquished the driver's seat is because Remy drives faster than anyone I've ever met and hasn't given a fuck about road rules since he was a kid, so if anyone is going to get us to the hospital in record time, it's him.

I stare down at my phone with trembling hands. They're a few miles behind us and gaining fast, but it does little to settle the violent ache inside my chest.

There's a reason I kept myself away from people for so many years and why I never regretted that choice. Because caring for others fucking hurts.

Especially when the only woman you've ever loved has a penchant for getting herself kidnapped over and over again.

That reminds me, I need to speak to Corbin about trackers for all of them.

I’m not getting myself into a family unit with a bunch of people that attract enemies like it’s going out of fashion without knowing exactly where they all are at all times.

Especially Chloe.

I wonder how many trackers I could have on her person at any given time.

“You’re looking more psychotic than normal,” Kingston murmurs from the passenger seat. “You’re not thinking about chaining Chloe to you for the rest of her life, are you?”

“The idea has merit,” I grunt. “But no. I was thinking about trackers.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Of course you were.”

“In the short time I’ve known her, Chloe has disappeared on me three different times, not including the time she ran and I spent seven hours in her trunk. I think it’s warranted.”

“Never said it wasn’t.”

Dropping my head back against the headrest, I drag in a ragged breath but it does little for the ache in my chest.

I need to see her.

I need to see she’s okay, but if Ronan’s voice when he demanded a car was anything to go by, I assume she’s hurt.

One of them is considering the trail of blood from the forest to the road back at the motel, but part of me hoped it was Damon.

Maybe that makes me a shitty person, but the guy kind of deserves it for all the shit he’s done, regardless of whether Chloe likes him.

As long as he doesn’t die, it’s fine.

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Kingston’s phone vibrates in his hand, tearing his attention from me to the screen. He taps it a couple of times, putting it on speakerphone.

“Ronan?”

“It’s me.” Damon’s voice comes down the line, and my chest tightens, because hearing him speak just confirms my theory: Chloe’s hurt. “We’re five minutes out from the hospital. Chloe was shot in the forest, and while I’ve done my best to keep her from losing too much blood and stop the bullet from making its way to her heart, she’s fading.”

“You let her get shot?” I snarl, earning me a glare from my boss.

“I didn’t *let* her do anything,” he snaps. “She jumped in front of a fucking bullet meant for me. It happened so fast.”

Sucking in a breath, I try to shove the rage from my mind. Because right now, I want to fucking kill him for allowing it to happen. We trusted him to keep her safe, and he let her take a goddamn bullet for him?

Rationally, I realize it’s not his fault, but that doesn’t calm the monster in my chest. He wants to fucking kill Damon for not protecting her.

“Are you hurt?” Kingston asks.

He hesitates for a moment before replying, “No. Mikayla needed me to be able to sign a marriage certificate and be alive to reap the rewards of the Lombardi name.”

Dark brown eyes meet mine, silently telling me to keep my mouth shut. “Did she say why she wanted the tie to your family so desperately?”

“No. Only that she couldn’t get in touch with Dad to ensure he would accept the contract as it stood a decade ago when it was dissolved.”

“Salvatore has been suspiciously quiet the last week. I’ve had a team monitoring him and his men, and as far as I can tell, they’re locked down.”

“Probably waiting for Damon to come back with Ronan and Chloe.”

Kingston’s eyes widen, and I realize he wasn’t privy to that conversation, and I was meant to be asleep.

“If you were awake for that conversation, you already know I had no intention of following through with it.”

“You did when you first got on the jet,” I challenge.

“Maybe at the beginning. But by the time we got to the cabin, I knew I couldn’t do it. I just had to accept losing everything I’ve spent my life working toward, which took some time.”

Kingston sighs. “We’ll talk about this later. None of it matters until Chloe is under the care of medical professionals.”

“How is she?” I ask.

Damon hesitates and that all but answers the question. “Her heart is beating, but she’s been out since before we got her to the car. She’s lost a lot

of blood, and the basement they kept us in wasn't exactly sanitary."

I press my eyes closed. "I need you to know I'll kill you if she dies."

"I'll hand you the gun," he responds without hesitation.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

# KINGSTON

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

I keep her hand clutched in mine as I speed toward the hospital.

Thankfully it's only a few blocks away, but it feels like we're in the car for an eternity before we finally reach the emergency room doors.

Grinding to a stop, I'm out of the car before the engine can switch off.

I lift Chloe into my arms as gently as I can manage, but I'm holding on by a thread. I've failed her. I promised I would keep her safe. I promised I would protect her. And yet here she is, barely responsive in my arms.

Sprinting toward the double doors, I ignore the waiting room full of people and seek out the closest nurse.

The short woman's eyes widen when she sees the blood soaking both me and Chloe, and she jumps into action before I can get a word out.

"Gurney over here now." She barks out the order. "Can you tell me what happened, sir?"

"I don't know," I choke out. "She was asleep for a long time, and I got worried so I woke her up. She's pregnant. About five weeks, I think. I have the records from my private doctor."

"And these marks on her wrists?" she questions as I carefully place her on the bed that seemingly appeared from nowhere.

“She escaped a bad situation a few days ago.” I keep my reply vague because telling anyone that Chloe fled the Lombardis will only draw them here.

The last thing Chloe needs right now is for her not-so-distant past to show up at the hospital.

The triage nurse stares at me for long seconds before giving me a curt nod. “What’s her name?”

“Chloe,” I reply. “Chloe Beaumont.”

I don’t know why I give my last name. I don’t have a good reason other than that I can’t give hers. But it sounds so fucking right coming from my lips that my chest tightens all over again.

“Can you tell me how long she’s been bleeding for?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. I checked on her about twenty minutes ago and got her here as quickly as I could.”

“Okay, we’re going to take care of her.” Another nurse appears and starts pushing the bed toward a set of doors that say “Authorized Access Only,” meaning they’re about to take her away from me. The thought has panic rolling over me in waves. I can’t keep her safe if I don’t have eyes on her.

“Is she going to be okay?” I choke out.

“We’re going to do everything we can.”

They don’t waste another second talking to me before pushing the bed through the doors and out of sight.

I drop into the nearest plastic seat, ignoring the way it groans under my weight, and drop my head into my blood-soaked hands.

It’s been years since I allowed myself to care for someone other than myself, and just days after I let Chloe slip beneath my walls, I’m faced with losing the most important person in my world.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# DAMON

### NOW

Every single cruel word that's ever passed my lips plays on loop as I stare down at Chloe.

I've checked her pulse so many times I'm not sure what I'll do with my hands when they take her away from me at the hospital, but it doesn't matter. Not if it means she's going to get the medical care she needs.

But the question lingering in the back of my mind refuses to ease.

What if she doesn't make it?

What would have been the point of all of this?

Of loving her and losing her. Of hurting her to save her. Of making myself so fucking miserable all these years for a throne I don't even fucking want.

Not if she's gone.

Not if her soul no longer walks this earth.

If I'm truly honest with myself, all I really want is the life I've been living this past week.

As broody and pathetic as I've been fighting it, I can't deny that the time in the cabin was the most at peace I've been in years.

Maybe since before I pushed Chloe away all those years ago.

As much as I want to believe I still hate Kingston, I haven't been able to get what he told me out of my mind. He had no reason to lie to me. He had

no reason to make up some story about how my mother was on her way to file for a divorce when they were hit.

In fact, they benefit from me going back to Miami because me being with them puts an even bigger target on our heads from my father.

Ronan he'll let go eventually, just the same way as he stopped hunting Chloe, but not me.

Not the heir to the crown.

Not the person he's spent decades preparing to take his place.

He won't let me go.

The car jerks to a stop, and my door is torn open by a frantic-looking Kingston.

His dark eyes lock onto Chloe's pale face, and he immediately bundles her into his arms, taking off toward the doors without a word.

Ronan jogs to catch up with him, brushing his fingers over Chloe's cheek as they disappear inside the hospital.

But I'm stuck in place, my body shutting down after everything we've been through the last twenty-four hours.

I've seen every kind of horror in my life. I've watched men die in the most grotesque of ways, and I haven't flinched. But holding the love of my life as she fades away in my arms is not something I ever could have prepared myself for.

"Get out of the car," Ryker snaps, and I drag my eyes to my open door where he waits with a clenched jaw.

Numbly, I force my body to move. I have to go inside, I have to be with her, but my mind and body aren't working together the way they should.

His golden eyes are darker than I've ever seen them, but it's how hard he has his jaw clenched that tells me he's seconds away from losing his shit.

I barely make it out of the car before my back hits the side so hard the air rushes from my lungs.

A gun presses to my temple while his other arm presses over my chest, holding me in place.

I'm a big guy, but a pissed-off Ryker is relentless.

"We trusted you with her safety," he grinds out.

Pressing my eyes closed, I force a breath through my lungs despite how they clench.

"You let her get *shot*. You let her be *taken*." Each word that passes his lips is harsher than the last.

I don’t argue, because he’s right. I did.

I didn’t protect her…again.

I failed her…again.

If the last twenty-four hours have taught me nothing else, it’s that I don’t deserve to be in Chloe’s life at all.

Not that I really thought I did considering how I’ve treated her over the last fifteen years, but I thought maybe I could make it up to her. Maybe if she just understood why I did what I did, she would be able to forgive me.

But I’d never truly deserve that forgiveness.

I would never deserve her light.

Maybe when everything is said and done, I’ll walk away. Without the throne I was promised or the woman I’ve loved since before I understood what the word meant. I’ll still see her and Ronan on holidays, and maybe that will be enough.

But even as I think it, I know it won’t be. No amount of time with her will ever be enough.

Even if she allowed me to love her forever, that time would be insignificant.

“Say something,” Ryker snarls, shoving me harder against the car.

“What do you want me to say?” I growl. “Do you want me to tell you that I would do *anything* to have switched places with her? Is that what you want? Because I would. If I could turn back time and stop her from jumping in front of that goddamn bullet, I would do it a million times over.”

He stares at me for long seconds, his golden eyes filled with rage and fear, and for a moment I think he’s going to kill me where I stand.

I would if I were him. If he were the one that got Chloe hurt. If he allowed her to be taken when she was in his care.

The fact he’s hesitating makes him a better man than me.

One worthy of her.

He blows out a rough breath and takes a step back.

But before he drops the gun he was holding to my head to his side, he aims it at my thigh and pulls the trigger.

Agony slices through my leg, almost knocking me to the ground, but I manage to keep myself upright and swallow the grunt that tries to escape.

Ryker’s shoulders ease slightly as he slips the gun into the back of his pants. He wraps an arm around me and, without a word, helps me hobble to the emergency room doors.

If I didn’t already know this motherfucker was a walking-talking contradiction, the fact he just shot me immediately before acting as my crutch to get to medical attention would have done it.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# RONAN

### NOW

We barely make it through the door before someone takes Chloe from Kingston.

The conflict is obvious in his dark eyes, the need to have her cared for warring with his need to protect her from any more pain, but he doesn't hesitate.

He carefully lays her on the bed, brushing his fingers through her matted hair for just a moment before nodding to the nurse to take her away.

I can barely breathe through the panic weighing on my chest.

Trusting strangers to keep her alive right now feels impossible, but they're her only chance.

Our only chance.

Because I know what it's like to live without Chloe, and I refuse to ever live like that again.

Kingston grasps my shoulder. "She'll be okay," he chokes out.

The words aren't for me. Or at least not me alone.

He's trying to convince himself of them because the idea of living without her is just as unthinkable to him as it is me.

Guiding him to an empty row of plastic chairs, we barely manage to take a seat before Ryker guides Damon into the emergency room, the latter with what appears to be a bullet wound he didn't have before we left them.

Kingston curses but neither of us gets up. The fact they're touching each other means they're not currently trying to kill one another, and they need to sort their shit out if we have any chance of living a peaceful life.

If that's even what my brother wants. He's spent his whole life living up to someone else's dream for him and never had the chance to have any of his own.

The nurse at the triage desk looks up at them with an unamused stare. In a town like this, she knows there's no chance two gunshot wounds are coming in so close together.

A wheelchair appears out of nowhere, and Ryker helps Damon sit down, saying something to the nurse, which I can only assume is a lie, before she wheels the chair through the same doors Chloe disappeared through just minutes ago.

He doesn't move immediately, his body tight with the same tension that bleeds through my every muscle.

We may have started as enemies, but we've built a bond these past few weeks, one that makes me itch to check on him.

Eventually he joins us, dropping into the seat beside me and causing the entire row to groan under his weight.

"Did you shoot Damon?" Kingston asks.

"Yep."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Why?"

"Because he allowed her to take a bullet for him."

"I don't think she gave him much of a choice in the matter," I sigh.

He shrugs and leans back in his seat. He reaches for the knife he keeps tucked in his pocket but pauses, remembering he's in public and drops his elbows to his knees instead.

"We need to talk about what comes next," Kingston says.

"Not without Damon," I reply.

A growl rumbles from beside me, and I spare Ryker a glance before turning my attention to King.

"I've never seen anyone look as wrecked as Damon did when I walked into that house. He's been repressing his feelings for Chloe for a long time, but that doesn't mean they don't exist." I massage the place over my heart as if it'll do anything to ease the ache there. "Plus, if we want to take down my father, he's our best shot."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# RYKER

NOW

Unfortunately, shooting the annoying Lombardi didn't alleviate any of the anxiety running rampant through my body.

It's a foreign feeling, one I've only felt a handful of times in my life, mostly because the woman my heart has attached itself to keeps getting herself into these situations.

Never again, though.

From now on she's going to be wrapped in cotton and protected at all costs.

I wonder if Kingston would sign off on one of our teams being on her detail full time. Obviously I'll be with her twenty-four seven, but you can never be too careful considering how often she almost gets herself killed.

It's been hours since they took her into surgery, and no matter how many threats of bodily harm I dish out, they refuse to give us any answers.

Damon came limping into the waiting room they moved us to an hour ago, but he hasn't said a word. Hasn't so much as looked at any of us, and I finally see what Ronan was talking about. He's every bit as wrecked as he said.

Footsteps in the hallway drag my attention from my least favorite part of this little family Chloe's collected for herself, hope bubbling in my chest that we might finally be getting answers.

But then a five-foot-nothing brunette appears in the doorway with two of her men on her heels, and I sigh.

I guess I know who Kingston was texting earlier.

“You promised you would protect her!” Camilla snaps as she stomps toward us.

She’s looking a lot better than she did the last time I saw her, but by the way Kaos and Bishop watch her, I doubt they agree.

“How is it between all of you that you allowed her to be kidnapped… again?”

“Princess,” Kaos warns.

She glances over at him, holding his eye for a moment before her shoulders drop on a sigh. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not that simple.”

Bishop steps up beside her and wraps an arm around her shoulders, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “They know how much Chloe means to you, Love.”

I didn’t understand their dynamic before, despite seeing firsthand how well they worked together to keep Camilla safe, but I get it now.

They each offer her something different, and she thrives because she has all of them.

Just the same way Chloe did as each of us accepted how the future was going to look for us.

She glances over at Damon across the room. He hasn’t moved since they walked in, hasn’t so much as looked up from where his head is in his hands.

If it weren’t for the tension in his shoulders, I’d think he was asleep.

But I’ve spent my life learning the body language of my targets, and I know with absolute certainty that he’s awake and listening.

“Any updates?” Camilla asks, taking the seat beside me with Bishop at her side while Kaos stands by the door, a silent sentry with his arms crossed over his body.

“They won’t tell us much. Just that she’s in surgery,” Kingston replies.

She nods and drops her head to Bishop’s shoulder.

“Crew and Kovu couldn’t make the trip?” I ask. The latter struggles to allow her out of his sight, much like me with Chloe, and it seems odd that he would allow her to leave the state without him.

Bishop shakes his head. “There are a lot of moving parts in New York right now as we prepare to take a back seat and allow the families to govern

themselves.”

“It’s a big change,” Kingston comments.

“It is. But it’s for the best for all of us. The next generation of leaders know how well things work without constant conflict between them, and we have faith that they’ll continue to make choices that benefit the city as a whole, rather than just their pockets. The fact we’ll still be around will hopefully be enough to stop them from getting greedy. And this way we have more time to support Cami.”

“And live a life outside of the Syndicate for the first time in most of your adult lives,” she adds with an eye roll.

The corners of my lips tip up in a smirk. I wonder how long it will be before she stabs one of them for hovering too much.

My attention snaps to the door when a doctor steps into the room, his face completely neutral.

“Are you the family of Chloe Weaver?”

“We are,” Kingston replies without hesitation.

The doctor looks at each of us with apprehension but doesn’t ask any additional questions.

Smart man doesn’t feel like dying today.

“Chloe is out of surgery and she’s stable. We managed to get the infection under control pretty quickly, which was our biggest concern. The bullet hadn’t traveled, which meant once we removed it and supplemented her significant blood loss, we were able to stabilize her. We’ve been monitoring her other organs to make sure they’re functioning properly, and we believe she will make a full recovery with no complications.”

The tension in the room falls away, and my chest fills with relief.

Aside from killing Damon, I hadn’t allowed my mind to wander to what I was going to do if she didn’t make it. Ending his life would have made me feel better for a split second, but what would I have done for the rest of my life without my reason for breathing?

“Thank you, Doctor,” Kingston says, but the emotion in his voice is clearer than I can ever remember it being.

“A nurse will be in shortly to take you to see her.” His eyes sweep over the group. “I think it would be better if only a few of you visit at a time. We want to keep her calm for at least the first twenty-four hours if possible.”

“Of course.” He nods.

The doctor disappears, and we sit in silence for a handful of moments before Damon pushes himself to his feet.

“I’m going to head out. I’d appreciate if one of you would keep me updated.”

“Where are you going?” Ronan cuts him off before he can reach the door.

“I don’t deserve to see her. I don’t deserve to breathe the same air as her after everything I’ve done.”

He pushes past his brother, not giving any of us a second glance before he limps from the room.

And here I was thinking we were finally making some progress.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# CHLOE

### NOW

*Warmth surrounds me, dragging me from a blissfully dreamless sleep.*

*Every morning I wake up sandwiched between two of my guys, and it never gets old, even if I'm almost always overheating.*

*Not that I'm complaining. I'll never get sick of waking up like this.*

*Thick fingers brush down my side from behind, and I realize Ryker's awake. He seems to have a sixth sense that wakes him up the second my dreams end and reality falls back around me.*

*"Good morning, Siren," he rumbles.*

*"Good morning," I murmur against Kingston's chest.*

*"Why don't you open your eyes for us, Mama?"*

*I frown, an ache pressing against my temple that I didn't notice before.*

*"Come on, Chloe," Ronan whispers. "Show me those pretty green eyes."*

*Did he sleep in here last night as well?*

*A thumb brushes over the space between my brows.*

*"Wake up for us, Sparrow."*

The dream falls away, and it takes me long seconds to realize I'm not in bed with my guys, nor am I warm or comfortable.

The combination of white ceiling tiles and an incessant beeping behind me are all I need to know I'm in the hospital, and that's when everything comes rushing back to me.

Running from the motel with Damon.

Being shot and taken.

The basement.

The hand wrapped around mine squeezes, and I force my aching eyes to where Ronan sits beside me, the dark marks beneath his eyes telling me exactly how exhausted he is.

"Hey, Sparrow," he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion.

"Where am I?" I croak.

A cup of water appears in front of me from the other side, and I glance over to find Ryker and Kingston sitting on a couch that they've dragged to the edge of the bed.

I take a small sip, but it does little to ease the dryness in my throat. After a few more sips, Ryker pulls the straw away and places it on the table beside the bed.

"I'll give you some more once we're sure it's not going to make you sick," he tells me, tapping the button beside my hand to call the nurses.

"How do you feel?" Kingston asks.

"Everything hurts."

He huffs out a small laugh. "I guess that was a stupid question, wasn't it, Mama?"

I allow my eyes to fall closed, giving them and my head a break from the bright lights.

God, I hate hospitals.

The sound of someone crossing the room and a soft click has me peeking one eye open to see the lights have been dimmed.

Ronan moves back to the edge of the bed and reclaims his seat, which is when I realize someone is missing.

"Where's Damon?"

They share a look, and my chest constricts.

Did something happen to him after I passed out?

Is he hurt?

Did Mikayla come back for him?

Has Salvatore found us?

“Shit,” Kingston mutters as my heart rate rises for us all to hear. “Damon’s okay, Mama. He’s just taking some time to himself.”

“He left?” I choke out.

“No,” Ronan replies immediately. “He’s in the car outside. He’s just dealing with some stuff right now.”

“Do you want me to let him know you’re asking for him?” Kingston asks, holding his phone up.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to force him to be anywhere he doesn’t want to be.” But even as I say it, my chest aches and tears push to the surface.

I should have known everything he said in the basement was bullshit.

I should have known he was just protecting himself the way he always does.

Ronan curses and takes my hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze. “The guilt is eating him alive, Chloe. He’s not out there because he doesn’t want to be here. He’s out there because he doesn’t think he *deserves* to be here.”

I don’t get a chance to respond before a nurse dressed in light blue scrubs with daisies all over them appears in the doorway.

“You’re awake!” She beams, moving to the edge of the bed when Ronan moves back to give her space. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I was shot,” I reply blandly, earning me a laugh from the nurse. Her soft blonde hair is pulled into a high ponytail that moves side to side with each step she takes.

“The light was bothering her so I turned it off. I hope that’s okay,” Ronan says, ever the polite brother. He has so much of his mother in him that sometimes I forget he was also raised by a monster.

“Of course.” She nods as she jots something down on my chart. “How’s your pain, Chloe?”

“It’s more the headache than anything,” I reply.

“That’s to be expected after everything you’ve been through. Sometimes the wound itself doesn’t start hurting until you move around. Let me chat to the doctor and get you some more pain meds to get ahead of it before it can get too bad. Does that sound okay?”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’m sure one of these three will call if you need anything in the meantime.” She gives me a wink as she heads back out the way she came.

We haven’t spent any time in the real world since I started entertaining the idea of being with more than one man, and it hasn’t once occurred to me that people might not accept our relationship, but so far so good, I guess.

Ronan pulls his chair back to the edge of the bed, careful not to allow the feet to drag across the ground before taking my hand again.

“Camilla is here,” he tells me.

“She is?”

He nods. “The guys took her to a hotel nearby to get some sleep, but she’ll be here in the morning as soon as visiting hours start up.”

I glance at the drawn curtains across the room and frown. “How long have I been out for?”

“You came out of surgery about twenty hours ago,” Kingston tells me.

“And you’ve been here the whole time?”

He huffs out a humorless laugh. “Mama, I can’t see us letting you out of our sight for more than a minute anytime soon. I’d get used to the three of us hovering if I were you.”

I guess that doesn’t sound so bad.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# KINGSTON

### NOW

Chloe's soft snores fill the quiet hospital room. The nurse gave her some pain medication that almost immediately knocked her out, but none of us have moved.

I don't know how I'm ever going to let her out of my sight after almost losing her, and by the way Ronan and Ryker watch every time her chest rises and falls, I don't think I'm the only one.

We need to make a plan for how to deal with both threats currently hanging over us, but Ronan was right. Damon should be a part of whatever we're planning, and he's too stubborn to be here.

It's not that I don't understand why he's feeling the way he is, because I do.

None of us will ever truly be worthy of her. Not when we've spent our lives sinning.

Chloe deserves a good man, a man that has never killed someone with their bare hands. But instead, she has four men that would sooner burn down the entire world than allow her to be hurt again.

But lucky for us, she doesn't want a good man.

She wants us, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure she has what she wants, including the man currently torturing himself for something he couldn't have controlled even if he wanted to.

Perhaps it’s a natural consequence of being raised as a mafia heir, or maybe it’s the guilt that he keeps failing the woman he never thought he’d have.

Regardless, it needs to stop.

“I’m going down to talk to Damon,” I announce, pushing myself to my feet.

Ryker raises a brow at me but only nods in response, while Ronan looks surprised.

“Call me if anything changes or the doctor comes around to see her.”

I make my way down the stairs and out into the parking garage. I was hesitant about bringing Chloe to a small hospital, but the care she’s received since she’s been here has been outstanding, and I fully intend to leave a very large donation when she’s allowed to leave.

Which I hope is soon.

Having her out in the open like this is making me antsy, and the sooner we’re behind a wall of security, the better.

Corbin is working on upgrading the system at the house in Maine. We likely won’t stay long, but Chloe is going to need somewhere safe to recuperate, and I don’t want to drag her across the country so soon after everything she’s been through.

Once she’s feeling better, we’ll make a plan that includes all of us.

I make it out to the car and find Damon exactly where Remy told us he was a few hours ago. They’ve been watching the entrances to ensure no one gets the jump on us while we’re vulnerable, and I asked them to keep an eye on him just in case he decides to do something stupid, like go after Mikayla or his father by himself.

Tugging the passenger side door open, Damon doesn’t spare me a glance as I settle beside him.

“It’s freezing in here,” I comment.

He shrugs but doesn’t tear his eyes off the windshield. “You get used to it.”

“How long are you planning on sitting out here?”

“Until she gets discharged.”

“And then what’s the plan?”

“I’ll work it out.”

I sigh and turn in my seat, moving my eyes over his disheveled appearance. He’s still wearing the suit he arrived at the hospital in,

complete with the hole in the leg where Ryker shot him and both his and Chloe's blood.

He's a mess.

"How long are you going to punish yourself for something that isn't your fault?"

"It's all my fault. Every shitty thing that's happened to Chloe is my fault. This is just the one that made me realize that."

"You are not solely responsible for the hardships Chloe has faced."

"She's better off without me."

"She's better off without all of us, Damon. She's better off with some nice guy that's never broken the law, that's never watched the light fade from someone's eyes as their soul left their body. But that doesn't mean we're going to give her up."

"Maybe we should."

I nod. "That's what separates men like us from the man she deserves, though. We will never stop working to be worthy of her. We'll never stop fighting for her. And if we have to, we won't hesitate to burn the world down for her. There are no lines we won't cross to keep her safe, no one we won't kill if it means she has a better life. And that is why she chooses us. Because she knows there's nothing we won't do for her."

He finally drags his eyes off the windshield and meets mine. "She almost died in my arms, King," he chokes out. "I don't know how I'm ever meant to forget how it felt as she begged me to say goodbye to you guys for her."

My chest tightens. "I know how it feels to be where you are right now, to blame yourself, to know you were almost responsible for her death." I swallow heavily. "When I found her in a pool of her own blood when she came to me to keep her safe, I never thought I'd be able to forgive myself. All I could think about was all the things I should have done. I should have checked on her more often. I should have had the doctor stay just in case something went wrong. But the reality it took me a long time to come to terms with is that no matter what I did, the outcome would have been the same. You can play the blame game for the rest of your life, or you can accept that sometimes things are out of our control and we're at the mercy of fate."

"You believe in that shit?"

“In fate?” I ask and wait for his nod to continue. “It’s hard not to believe when the best things that ever happened to me were by chance. Your mom just so happened to be in the same group home as me. There were hundreds in the city, thousands in the country, and somehow, we ended up at the same one.” I glance up at the hospital, my chest tightening when I think about Chloe looking so tiny in the hospital bed. “And then there’s her. I spent years after the accident trying to make sense of what happened that day. I built Hawk and made it my mission to rid the world of scum like your father, but it wasn’t until Chloe called that night that I understood why I was doing it. I remember the exact moment I knew she would become my entire world. The doctor was setting up the ultrasound machine and the anxiety was rolling off Chloe in waves, and then she reached for me.” The corners of my lips tip up as I recall the moment, a moment I’ve never shared with anyone. “Everything made sense in that moment. All those years alone, all that time I spent searching for a new purpose, it just… clicked and I knew there was nothing I wouldn’t do for her and that baby.”

Damon doesn’t reply immediately, and I don’t really expect him to. He needs to find his own way, and although we don’t understand it, we can’t push him.

After a few minutes, I reach for the handle, ready to get back to my girl and ease the anxiety in my chest.

“I can’t stand the idea of her hurting because of me. All I’ve ever brought her is pain.”

“If that were true, she wouldn’t have asked for you as soon as she opened her eyes.”

I climb out of the car without another word and leave Damon to stew on everything I’ve said.

This is the first time he truly gets to choose something that he wants for himself. I just hope he chooses right.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# CHLOE

### NOW

The next time I wake up, the pain hits me.

Every breath comes with a searing pain, as if my stomach is tearing open.

I drag my eyes open and meet golden orbs filled with concern.

"You in pain, Siren?" he murmurs.

The room is still dark, but the curtains are surrounded by a halo of light telling me I've been out for a while.

I nod.

Ryker reaches for the call button, squeezing my hand in his much larger one.

"Thank you."

"Always, Chloe." He presses a kiss to the back of my hand, the sweet gesture so at odds with the brutal man he is to the rest of the world.

I glance around the room, finding Ronan and Kingston asleep on the couch, their necks at angles I'm not envious of, but I'm glad they're getting some rest. I know them both well enough to know they wouldn't have slept at all while I was missing, and my need to take care of them is as strong as theirs to care for me.

But it's the body on the far side of the room that makes me pause.

Damon’s icy gaze meets mine from the shadows, his entire body tense as he stares back at me.

“He came up a few hours ago,” Ryker whispers.

I want to call out to him. I want him to be as close as the others. But the fact he’s here at all is enough for now.

The rest can wait.

The same nurse as earlier hustles into the room, not giving any of my guys a glance as she approaches the bed.

“How are you feeling, Chloe?”

“The pain has officially arrived.” I mean it to come out lighthearted, but even speaking makes my stomach feel like it’s about to come apart.

“You’re due for some pain meds now, and then I’d like to see if we can get you up on your feet, even just to take a few steps.”

Ryker’s hand squeezes mine tighter. “Is that a good idea if she’s in so much pain?”

She nods, a soft smile on her lips. “It’s best we get her up as soon as possible to avoid more pain later on. It’ll hurt in the beginning, but I promise it’s better in the long run.”

“I’m happy to try,” I reply before he can argue any further.

He’s a lot of things, but he’s not a medical professional, and the sooner I’m up and about, the sooner I can go home.

The thought makes my chest ache because not for the first time, I don’t really have a home.

Not a physical one at least.

“Amazing. I’ll be right back with the medication.”

She disappears without a backward glance and I look back to Ryker, who is significantly tenser than he was a few minutes ago.

“You can’t protect me from everything, Ry.”

He frowns. “I can’t stand to see you in pain.”

“I know, but sometimes it’s unavoidable.”

The nurse steps back into the room and makes quick work of administering the syringe straight into my IV before disposing of the needle.

“How does a shower sound, Chloe?”

I groan. “Like heaven.”

It’s been days since I’ve felt clean, and between the filth of the basement and being covered in my own blood, I can’t think of anything I’d

like more than a shower.

She laughs. “I thought it might. Would you prefer I help you, or one of your…” She trails off, but there’s a glint of knowing in her eyes.

“I can help her,” Damon’s voice comes from the corner.

Ryker lets out a low rumble, but I’m surprised when he doesn’t immediately argue.

“Great! Let me know when the pain starts to come down, and then I’ll help you out of bed.” She glances at Damon. “She’ll be a little shaky on her feet to begin with, so you’ll need to support her throughout.”

“I’ve got it.”

She updates my chart as the medication moves through my body, and I’m relieved when it only takes a few minutes for the pain to start to ease.

“Feeling a little better, Siren?” Ryker asks.

I nod.

“You ready to try standing?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” I huff out a nervous laugh.

She comes around to stand beside Ryker, and he helps her move the blankets out of the way.

“I’m going to bring up the back of the bed and see how you handle that before we get you up. Sound okay?”

I swallow heavily but nod as anxiety rolls through me. I’ve never been great with pain that wasn’t related to my endometriosis, and considering how excruciating just lying here was when I woke up, I’m nervous to push it.

Thankfully the pain meds are doing their job and there’s only a slight tug of discomfort when I’m sitting upright.

The nurse and Ryker help me turn until my legs are dangling off the edge of the bed, unhooking the IV while I get used to the feeling of sitting unsupported.

I take a few deep breaths before taking her hands and allowing her to guide me to my feet.

“Just take it nice and easy, Chloe. You won’t be running any marathons, but once we can get you walking a few times a day, the doctor will be more inclined to discharge you.”

Stars dance in my vision as my body settles into standing for the first time in days, but they fade after a few seconds.

Ronan and Kingston are awake now, watching with concern as the nurse helps me shuffle forward.

“You’re doing great, Mama.”

The simple encouragement along with the pain that never comes allows me to take a more confident step toward the bathroom at the end of the bed where Damon is waiting.

He watches my every move with an intensity I should be used to from him, but it’s different now. He’s no longer forcing contempt to the surface to hide his true feelings for me.

We have a long way to go, but my stomach flutters with possibilities.

A few weeks ago, it felt impossible that these four men could tolerate each other for five minutes, let alone a lifetime, and now?

Now I can’t help but let my mind run wild with the idea that this could work.

That my heart could finally feel complete.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# DAMON

### NOW

I don’t know what possessed me to volunteer to help Chloe shower.

Not only am I the one on the thinnest ice, but it seems like an inappropriate time to see each other naked for the first time.

And yet when the nurse mentioned her needing help, the words were out before I could stop them.

I need to make amends for the pain I’ve caused her. I need to prove to her and the others that I can be what she needs me to be. I can take care of her. I can be soft with her.

And if that means helping her shower after she took a bullet for me, then that’s what’s going to happen.

Ryker shoots daggers at me from over the top of her head, but I can’t take my eyes off Chloe and her quiet determination.

Each step is more confident than the last, and pride fills my chest as I watch her move toward me.

The nurse releases one of Chloe’s arms and moves to the side, allowing her to reach for me.

I take a step forward, ignoring the pain in my leg. They gave me something for the pain but I haven’t been able to bring myself to take it.

I deserve to feel the pain for the part I played in hers.

“Good work, Duchess,” I murmur.

Faded green eyes lock with mine, and my chest cracks open at the emotion staring back at me.

I've hurt her so much. What gives me the right to stand in front of her? What gives me the right to be here at all?

"Thank you for coming back," she whispers. "When I woke up and you weren't here, I thought…"

"I meant every single word I've said, Chloe. You never need to doubt that, even if I've given you every reason to do just that."

She nods, nibbling at her bottom lip as the nurse steps out of the bathroom with a wide smile. "I've got the shower started for you, and there's a chair if you need it, but press the button if she starts to get dizzy or isn't feeling well."

"Got it." I nod, dropping my attention back to the woman clinging to me. I've let her fall too many times before, I refuse to ever do it again.

The fact she trusts me to take care of her at all is nothing short of a miracle, and I make a quiet promise to myself to never break that trust.

Never again.

I ignore the others as I carefully guide Chloe into the bathroom, but I only close the door halfway. Any further and I'll have the overgrown golden retriever in here, and there's not enough space for more than just the two of us.

"You're limping," she says softly, her eyes flicking up to meet mine. "Did they hurt you after I passed out?"

I huff out a laugh. "No, but your bodyguard takes his responsibilities very seriously."

A soft gasp fills the room beside the running water of the shower.

"I deserved it, Duchess. If the roles had been reversed and you were hurt while under his care, I would have put the bullet in his head."

"Damon," she scolds. "You can't go around shooting each other."

I drop a kiss to her temple, reveling in the feel of her in my arms. It's going to take some time getting used to letting myself touch her like this. "Let us work our shit out. It's going to take some time, but if a single bullet is the only bodily harm that any of us have inflicted on one another, we're doing okay."

She shakes her head, but there's a soft smile on her lips that I'm desperate to keep in place.

"Hold on to my shoulders."

She does as she’s told without hesitation, only wincing for a moment at the new position.

Once I’m sure she’s steady, I pull my hands away and reach behind her, untying the knots as quickly as I can.

Guiding the fabric over her shoulders, I wait for her to give me a small nod before I allow it to fall from her body.

Our eyes remain locked as I shuck my pants, leaving my boxer briefs in place because my dick has been waiting for this moment just as long as my heart has, and the last thing she needs right now is to be staring at my inappropriately hard cock.

I reposition her hands on my hips and tug my shirt off, leaving just some thin cotton between us.

Taking her hands back in mine, I walk backward beneath the warm spray that soaks us both in a matter of seconds.

As far as hospital water pressure goes, I’m impressed.

Droplets cling to her dark lashes as she stares up at me with far more trust than I deserve, but I dare not break eye contact. I’ve craved this kind of connection with her for so many years I’ve lost count, and I intend to savor every second she affords me from here on out.

“You okay?”

She nods. “Just trying to convince myself I’m not dreaming.”

“Definitely not dreaming, Duchess,” I promise, carefully wrapping my arms around her, and I just about fall on my ass when hers wind around my waist.

She rests her head against my chest, letting out a soft sigh of contentment.

“Tell me something true,” she murmurs. “Something you’ve never told anyone before.”

Years of lying rush back to me, the habit so thick I can barely break through the need to give her a mistruth because that’s all I’ve known for so long. “Do you remember how we used to spend our birthdays watching movies and eating so much sugar we made ourselves sick?”

“How could I forget?” She half laughs, but there’s a sadness in her tone that makes my chest ache beneath her cheek.

“I never stopped coming,” I admit. “I would wait until you and Ronan were comfortable and then I’d sneak into the back row and sit behind the

chairs out of sight. It was the one tradition I couldn't keep myself away from."

Her lips part in surprise as tears fill the eyes I deprived myself of all these years. "You were there?"

"Every single one."

She lets out a soft sob before burying her face back in my chest, and for long minutes we allow the water to fall around us.

It won't be long before one of the others comes to check on us, but I couldn't tear myself from her even if I wanted to.

I spent years depriving us both of moments like this, but that's over now.

Now I'm just going to spend the rest of my life giving Chloe everything she could ever want or need.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# CHLOE

### NOW

There are few things a shower doesn't fix, and by the time I'm back in bed with fresh pajamas and washed hair, I feel infinitely better than I did when I opened my eyes.

Damon helped me back to bed, pulling the blankets over my legs and fluffing my pillows before returning to his seat on the other side of the room.

I hate that he's punishing himself.

It was me who made the split-second decision to jump in front of a bullet. It happened so fast there was nothing he could have done to stop me.

Ronan carefully brushes my damp hair like he used to do when we were teenagers. It was one of the things he did when I was in the middle of a flare that made me feel less alone in my pain.

"How are you feeling, Sparrow?"

"Better." I smile. "Nothing a shower and my favorite guys can't fix."

He huffs out a laugh, but there's no ignoring the tension that rolls around us. It's been thick in the air since I woke up the first time, and as much as I would like to, I can't pretend it doesn't exist.

"Where's Mikayla?" I ask loud enough for the others to hear the question.

Kingston sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We don’t know. We had a team follow her when she fled the farmhouse, but she gave them the slip.”

I nod slowly, my anxiety pushing to the surface despite my best efforts to keep it at bay.

“We’re not going to let her hurt you, Chloe,” Ronan promises.

“But it’s not just me I’m worried about her hurting,” I whisper.

I’ve waited for what feels like a lifetime to feel whole, and I don’t know how to explain to them how terrified I am of losing them just as everything has started to fall into place.

We have so much to figure out, but even in as much pain as I am, I feel more at peace than I have in years. I’m not ready to lose it just yet.

Kingston drags the couch to the edge of the bed while Ryker takes the chair on the other side of me.

“I don’t want you worrying about this, Mama. All you need to focus on is getting better. The rest can wait.”

I nibble at the inside of my cheek and glance across the room to my only guy not surrounding me. “What happens next?”

“We kill Salvatore and Mikayla and anyone else that could pose any threat to you,” Ryker answers immediately.

“No, I mean…” I swallow heavily, ignoring the way my chest tightens. “I mean with us.”

Anxiety clings to me when none of them rush to answer because as unrealistic as it may seem, I had hoped they had it all worked out.

Ronan squeezes my hand, pulling my attention to his tired eyes. “Right now, the only thing that matters is getting you better and neutralizing any threats to keep you safe. The rest we’ll work out as we go.” He presses a kiss to the back of my hand. “But what I can confidently say about every man in this room is that there’s nothing we won’t do for you, and if there’s a way we can make this work, then that’s what we’ll do. Okay?”

I nod, but my chest aches at the possibility of losing any of them.

A life with only part of my heart seems inconceivable, even after such a short time having them all together.

“When the doctor gives clearance for you to be discharged, we’re going to head to Maine while we regroup and make a plan without being out in the open like this,” Kingston explains.

“Okay,” I whisper, but my mind can’t help but wander to all the unanswered questions.

“Now, there’s a very impatient five-foot-nothing spitfire in the waiting room. Are you feeling up to visitors?” Ronan asks, and I can’t help but snicker at the description.

Camilla is exactly what I need to distract me from my racing mind, even if it’s just for a little while.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# KINGSTON

NOW

I slip out of the room once Chloe is happily chatting away to Camilla, leaving Ryker and Ronan to watch over her.

Damon follows without a word, and we don't have to go far to find Bishop on his phone down the hallway.

If there's one thing that I can relate to, it's the need to stick close to the woman I love.

Even now, I don't know how I kept myself away from her all those years, how I allowed other people to watch out for her when it went against my nature to trust anyone else with the most important thing in my world.

But never again.

I spent all those years building a life suitable for her, and I fully intend to give her everything she's ever wanted.

Bishop notices us and quickly ends his call before shoving his phone in his pocket. "How's she doing?"

"Better," I reply. "I spoke to the doctor while Damon was helping her shower, and he said he expects her to be discharged tomorrow if all goes well."

"That's great news!" He smiles. "I just spoke to Crew. He's putting together a team to assist as needed."

"You don't need to do that," I argue.

“Unfortunately for everyone involved, Camilla won’t take no for an answer.” He chuckles. “Chloe was there for her through everything, and now she wants to be there to return the favor any way she can.”

I nod in understanding. It’s not news to me how special their bond is because I watched it develop from afar. I saw as they both healed from losses that once seemed impossible. I watched as Chloe nurtured Camilla’s soft side while her father pushed her further into the role she was born for. And my heart ached for my girl as Camilla needed her less and less the older she got.

“Any news on Lombardi?” he asks, eyes flicking to Damon behind me. “Senior, that is.”

“He’s been far too quiet, and it’s beginning to worry me,” I admit. “He’s a paranoid fuck at the best of times, but by now he realizes that both his sons have left the fold with no intention of returning, and that leaves him vulnerable. He has no clear successor, which means he’ll have threats from the outside as well as his own men looking for an easy power grab, and if there’s one thing I know about Salvatore Lombardi, it’s that he’s most dangerous when he’s backed into a corner.”

Bishop nods. “I’ll see if any of the New York families have heard anything, but I’d imagine he’s playing his cards close to the chest right now. What about Mikayla?”

“In the wind,” I sigh. “She all but disappeared when our guys were following her. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say she swapped cars, but Corbin hasn’t been able to confirm the theory.”

“I think the best thing we can do is take time to get all the information,” Damon says. “You’re right about my father. The walls are closing in on him, and he’s going to be out for blood. We need all the facts before we even think about taking him and his operation out.”

I turn to him with a raised brow. This is the first time he’s confirming he wants to play a role in taking his father down, and I want to make damn sure that when push comes to shove, he’ll be able to go through with it.

He ignores my look of surprise. “Mikayla is a whole other beast entirely. We’ll need time to look into what Sebastian told the guys under duress and make sure he was telling the whole truth. Taking down a global trafficking ring isn’t something we can rush into, but we do need to ensure Mikayla is off the board and never able to hurt Chloe again.”

“Where is Sebastian now?” Bishop asks.

“The guys are taking turns watching him while they’re not here. He’s not going anywhere, but I’d rather keep him alive while he could be useful to us, especially given how little we know about the organization the Vegas are in bed with,” I reply.

“Good thinking. We can take him back to New York with us if you’d rather not have him in Maine while Chloe recovers.”

I glance at Damon in question, giving him a chance to weigh in. If things are going to work between the five of us, I have to give up my need to control everything and make every decision, even if it goes against my nature to do so.

“That might be for the best. Chloe has been through enough, and she doesn’t need to know there’s a prisoner somewhere on the premises. Plus, your guys will likely have their hands full if all of us are going to insist on being wherever she is rather than on the ground.”

“I’ll have Kovu prepare the basement for a guest. It’s been a while since he’s gotten his hands dirty.” He chuckles.

“Thanks, man. Appreciate it.”

“We’re basically family now.” He nods to the closed door our women are behind.

I’ve kept my circle since leaving the Lombardi compound all those years ago, but I don’t hate the idea of widening it half as much as I would have a few months ago.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

# CHLOE

NOW

"Your wound is looking great, and your blood came back clear of infection," Dr. Canning, a blonde woman in her mid-forties, tells me with a friendly smile. "I want you to take it easy over the next few days but keep up regular walks a few times a day until you feel up for more. I wouldn't be doing any heavy lifting for at least a few weeks, but you'll be okay to return to regular activities by the weekend."

I catch Ryker's smirk out of the corner of my eye, but I force my face to remain neutral even if my cheeks heat.

"I understand the nurse went over how to change your dressing with you…" She trails off as she gestures to Ronan before glancing around at the other three men that line the edge of the room.

"Boyfriend," he inserts helpfully, holding up a bag of supplies the nurse gave him. "And yes, I got a crash course on when and how to change them until the end of the week when we should allow the wound to dry out."

"Fantastic. I'll go and complete the discharge paperwork while you get dressed, but I think you'll be good as new before you know it." She turns on her heel and leaves the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

"I thought I'd have to speak to the police before they would let me leave," I say as I reach for the pile of clothes at the end of the bed.

Ryker picks them up before my fingers can connect. He steps in front of where I'm perched on the edge of the hospital bed and lifts the oversized T-shirt that I'm certain belongs to one of them over my head.

"Kingston dealt with it," he tells me as he carefully guides a fresh shirt that actually fits me over my head.

"What exactly does that mean?" I ask slowly.

"I made a sizable donation to the hospital in exchange for them slightly altering yours and Damon's records."

Ryker's lips quirk up at the reminder, and I roll my eyes. If things work out between us, I'm going to have my hands very full with their distaste for one another.

Just the thought makes my chest ache. The last thing I want is for them to have to coexist with one another just because of my selfish need to have them all.

It's unfair of me to expect them to get along for my benefit, and while I want to think that things can work out, I need to be realistic about my expectations, because if I let myself fall into what could be, I'm likely just to get my heart broken, and I'm not sure I'd survive it.

I nibble at my bottom lip, trying to ease the anxiety running rampant through my chest.

My ever-observant former bodyguard frowns, brushing his thumb over my cheek in gentle swipes. "You okay, Siren?"

I nod.

"Don't lie to me," he warns.

"I'm not," I murmur. "It's just…a lot has changed the last few months, and everything feels…uncertain."

He leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. "You leave the worrying to us, Chlo."

"That's easier said than done," I argue. "There are multiple people that want me dead, I'm recovering from being shot, and the four of you are at risk of killing one another at a moment's notice. It's not exactly a stress-free time in my life."

He huffs out a laugh. "I promise we will not kill each other. We have a very good incentive to be nice to one another, and as often as we may argue, we're adults. You are not responsible for our shit. Okay?"

I swallow heavily but nod.

“Good girl,” he praises. “Let’s finish getting you dressed and then we can get out of here. I don’t know about you, but I can’t fucking wait to eat something that wasn’t made in a hospital.”

I groan at the thought of food. It feels like a lifetime ago that I was eating a home-cooked meal at the cabin. “Can we get burgers?”

“Anything you want, Chloe.” He drops another kiss to my cheek before crouching down in front of me with my sweatpants in his huge, tattooed hands.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing a man like Ryker on his knees for me.

“Careful, Siren,” he rumbles when he catches my eye. “I’m going to struggle to keep my hands to myself enough without you looking at me like that.”

“Sorry.” I smirk.

“No, you’re not,” Ronan says against the shell of my ear. “Just remember you won’t be on bed rest forever, and we’ve been waiting very patiently to get back inside your perfect body.”

I groan, dragging the attention of Kingston and Damon, who were speaking in hushed whispers, their eyes darkening when they find my cheeks pink and lips parted.

“Don’t go asking for trouble, Mama,” Kingston warns.

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

He chuckles, prowling forward until his fingers grasp my chin and tip my face up. His dark eyes are filled with a mixture of heat and concern. “You know exactly what you’re doing, Chloe,” he murmurs, his lips close enough I can almost taste them. “And unless you want to be edged into oblivion as soon as you’re cleared, I suggest you not tease.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, my cheeks aching as I try to keep the smile from my face.

As much as I don’t hate the idea, it seems wise not to let him know that.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

# RONAN

NOW

"You said it was a beach house," Damon grumbles, dropping our bags beside the grand staircase across from the front door.

"It's a house on the beach." Kingston shrugs as he guides Chloe into the foyer, her eyes comically wide as she looks around.

The drive was surprisingly quiet despite how long it was. We're on high alert, and it didn't matter how we tried to convince ourselves that we were safe. We couldn't shake the feeling that we were being followed.

Growing up as a Lombardi, I'm used to having enemies. It comes with the territory, and I rarely gave it much thought.

But this is different in so many ways.

For starters, we have two threats that we can't place.

No one has seen Salvatore for over a week, and that's unlike him. He may be paranoid as hell and only leave the compound with an army of men to protect him, but he never misses Thursday poker. He's been playing at the cigar lounge in Miami since before I was born, and he's missed approximately three games in thirty years.

And yet he's missed the last two weeks without so much as a word.

I'd probably think he was dead if it weren't for the fact no one has come out as the new leader of the Lombardi family.

His absence raises more questions than we have answers, and the not knowing is making me antsy.

The mole Kingston had in the family has also gone dark, which could mean he's changed sides or that he's no longer breathing. Either way, we're not getting any information from him.

Damon mutters under his breath as he stalks farther into the house. He's been different since I found him and Chloe at the run-down farmhouse.

He's quieter, more reserved, and for the first time in his life, he's uncertain of his place.

He always knew what his life would look like. There was never a moment where he had the chance to question what he wanted or who he wanted to be, and suddenly having those choices thrust at him all at once must be overwhelming, even for someone as sure of himself as Damon.

The other change is how he watches Chloe.

I don't think he took his eyes off her for even a second of the five-hour drive despite riding shotgun.

"There's no way this is secure," he calls from the back of the house. "There's a whole wall of windows back here."

"It's secure," Kingston replies with an irritated huff. "It's not like security is what I've dedicated the last twenty years of my life to or anything."

Ryker drops the last of our stuff by the door and tugs Chloe into his arms. "Is the annoying Lombardi being annoying again?"

I snicker and step closer to them, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. It doesn't seem to matter how much I touch her, it's not enough. I always need more, and I don't think that's ever going to change.

I'll never take a second of our time together for granted.

"Let's get you up to bed, Sparrow," I murmur.

She rolls her eyes. "I don't need to go to bed, Ro. It's four in the afternoon. I won't sleep tonight if I nap now."

"You need to rest," Ryker says.

"And I will, but I don't need to be in bed to do that."

Without another word, she steps out of our hold and follows Damon through the house.

She's come so far over the last few days, and most people wouldn't even realize she's hurt with how steady she is on her feet.

Ryker brushes his hand down his face when she steps out of view. “She’s going to be the death of me. I’m sure of it.”

Kingston chuckles and slaps his back. “Welcome to loving someone.”

“She should be in bed, right?”

“You know Chloe, she doesn’t like to be stagnant for too long if she can avoid it. She just spent days in a hospital room after a near-death experience. I can’t imagine that’s been very good for her mental health.”

He sighs. “I guess. I just don’t want her to overdo it.”

“Sometimes you have to trust her to know what’s best for her, bro. We can’t protect her from everything, no matter how much we would like to,” I say before following her and Damon’s path to the back of the house.

The beach comes into view and stops me in my tracks. The sky is mottled with pinks and blues as the sun prepares to go down for the night, making way for its counterpart.

This is one of the houses we checked out when we were looking for where Kingston was hiding Chloe, but it’s different when you’re not living in a perpetual state of pure terror.

I find them standing by the glass doors that lead onto a large deck. They’re not touching but their shoulders are so close together they may as well be.

Damon glances down at her every few seconds, as if he’s afraid she’ll disappear if he stops watching her for even a second.

The dark marks beneath his eyes get worse with every hour that passes, but I know my brother well enough to know he still has a day or two in him before his body will force him to sleep.

Leaning against the doorway, I watch them for long minutes. After so many years of them being at each other’s throats, it’s strange to see them at peace with one another like they were when we were younger.

The change in both of them is obvious. The animosity they carried for one another weighed on them more than they would have ever admitted, and now it’s noticeably absent.

All I want is to give them both what they’ve been missing all these years, but first we have to neutralize the threats that are circling.

By any means necessary.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# CHLOE

NOW

It’s been a long time since I’ve had a real home.

As much as I loved my time with the De Marcos, it never felt like it was mine. Eventually I knew I would have to move on, and that knowledge stopped me from ever feeling like it was where I belonged.

The closest I’ve come since escaping the compound was that little cabin in the woods. The quiet and serenity were addictive as I allowed myself to consider the future for the first time in as long as I could remember.

But it wasn’t until we stepped into the beach house, if that’s what you want to call the oceanfront mansion Kingston pulled up in front of a few days ago, that my heart felt at home.

It could just be because the guys aren’t actively trying to kill each other right now and are making every effort to be nice to one another, or it could be because we’re all together in a place that feels safe.

Regardless, I find myself sitting on the back deck every morning staring out as the sun peeks over the horizon.

It’s breathtaking.

The back door opens, but I don’t bother looking up. I know it’s Ryker by his presence alone.

Damon is probably still watching me from the kitchen window like he does every morning. He thinks I don’t know he’s not sleeping, but when I

wake up in the middle of the night and find him in the armchair beside the bed, it's obvious he's only pretending to be asleep.

"What have I told you about coming out here by yourself, Siren?" he says as he drops onto the other cushion of the outdoor lounge I spend most of my days curled up on.

I roll my eyes. "I'm perfectly safe out here. Just like King keeps telling you."

He mutters something under his breath before plucking me from my seat and perching me in his lap. He rearranges the blanket I had over my lap, wrapping it around us both as I settle my head on his chest.

"You're happy here." He doesn't pose it as a question, telling me he already knows the answer.

"How could I not be? The four of you haven't pulled a weapon on each other the whole time we've been here."

Ryker's chest rumbles with a deep laugh. "Not that you've seen."

"You don't let me out of your sight long enough to threaten anyone," I point out.

"Touché."

"I'm worried about Damon," I admit.

He presses a kiss to the top of my head and tightens his hold on me. "I know, Siren. But he's just working through his shit. I can't imagine holding you while you bled out. That's bound to fuck anyone up."

"He's not sleeping."

"Ronan has a sedative to give him if he goes much longer. Trust us to take care of each other while you recover, okay?"

"I'm basically good as new," I argue.

"That may be so, but that doesn't negate the fact that we almost lost you. You chose four men that crave control, you had to expect that we would be overprotective when you're hurt."

I sigh. Because he's right. As much as I would like for them to accept that I'm fine and I don't need them hovering, this is who they are, and I wouldn't change them for the world.

"Any word on Salvatore or Mikayla?"

His body tenses beneath me for a moment, his hold on me so tight it borders on pain before he forces himself to relax. "Bishop was able to find some information on the trafficking ring the Vegas are working with. It's as bad as we expected and not something we'll be able to take out alone.

Terrance Vega hasn't been seen or heard from in months, which could mean he's in hiding, or he could be dead. Mikayla and Salvatore are also MIA."

He tries to hide his frustration from me, but it's obvious this is weighing on him. His need to keep me safe is challenged by the fact he doesn't know how to do that, and he fucking hates it.

"They'll show up eventually," I assure him.

"That's what I'm worried about."

I press a kiss to his chest, reveling in the steady beat of his heart beneath my lips. I spent a lot of years alone, too afraid to allow anyone to touch me, and yet this is where I feel most at home.

In their arms.

And maybe that's the thing that makes the beach house feel like it's where I belong.

Because it's not really about the house at all, it's the four men inside it.

"I love you," I whisper.

His body tightens for a beat that seems to last a lifetime. Anxiety tugs at the edges of my mind. Did I say it too soon? I thought after everything we've been through that time wouldn't matter as much. Hell, he's made it his mission to build me the life I've always wanted, including all four of the men that I can't help but need.

"You love me?" he asks slowly, as if the idea is the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard.

I tilt my head up until I'm staring into golden eyes that have become my safe place. "Yeah, Ryker. I love you." I smile softly.

His lips part but quickly snap shut again when he can't find the words he's looking for. "You love me?" he asks again.

I huff out a laugh and rearrange myself so I'm straddling his lap, which isn't an easy feat with how tight he's holding me against his chest.

Prying one of my arms free, I rest it against his cheek. "I love you, Ryker. How could I not when you make me feel like I'm the most important thing in your universe, when you constantly show up for me in any way I need you, and you made it your personal mission to give me all the pieces of my heart?"

He leans into my palm, but his eyes never tear from mine, as if he's searching for doubt. But he won't find any.

"You don't have to say it back. I know it's a little soon, but I wanted you to know how I felt. I guess the whole almost dying thing has made me

hesitant to waste any time on the things that matter."

He shakes his head slowly, a soft smile tipping up the corners of his lips. "I've known I was in love with you from the very beginning, Chloe. Since before I knew I could have you, since the first time I locked eyes with you and saw everything you try to hide from the world. It took me a while to work out what the emotion was, but once I realized it was love, I knew I'd never be able to let you go." He leans forward, pressing his forehead to mine, and for a moment the rest of the world ceases to exist. The waves crashing on the sand fade away, the cool air against my back where the blanket has slipped disappears, and all that's left is the man that has never made me doubt his feelings for me. "I love you so fucking much it makes me crazy. I love you so much I don't think there's a single line I wouldn't cross for you. I love you so damn much I'm terrified of ever having to live in a world you're not a part of."

His words fill my chest with warmth, and I don't hesitate as I press my lips to his, reveling in the warmth of them. Every part of Ryker is hard, but as he kisses me with so much reverence I can barely believe it's him beneath me, I realize everything is going to be okay.

Because surely the universe wouldn't give me everything I've ever wanted, just to tear it out from under me…right?

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# RYKER

NOW

She loves me.

Chloe loves me.

Her words have played on repeat all day, and my heart can barely handle all the emotions running through it.

Going from not giving a fuck about anyone to loving someone with every single fiber of my being is certainly a learning curve, but one I'm embracing.

It's the first day since we arrived at the beach house that it's rained, disrupting my girl's normal routine of reading on the deck all day.

Instead, she's on the couch in the living room, her head resting in Ronan's lap as she reads some smutty book she doesn't think any of us know about.

Little does she know I've been reading along with her every chance I get.

I want to know exactly what makes our girl hot and bothered, and by the way she's been squirming the last fifteen minutes, it seems like she's enjoying the scene she's reading.

The female main character finds herself being shared by three of her guys while the other is watching on, calling the shots as he pumps his cock.

I have to admit, it’s hot as fuck, and if this is what our girl wants, it’s what she’s going to get.

Kingston flew his personal doctor in to check on Chloe, and she quickly cleared her for general activities, including sex, which I made sure to ask about, much to my girl’s dismay. She was so embarrassed her cheeks turned the most delectable shade of pink.

Ronan’s reading something on the laptop he has resting on the arm of the couch, completely oblivious to how turned on the woman in his lap is.

His brother finally fell asleep on the couch across from them after days of watching her like a hawk. I can barely stand to be in the same room as the man, and even I was getting worried.

I’ll let Chloe keep reading her book for now. I need to find Kingston and talk him through a theory anyway.

It doesn’t take long to locate him because none of us ever stray far from our girl at the moment. He’s set up a makeshift office in the nook beside the kitchen, where he has a view of the living room when he leans back.

“Hey,” he greets me, glancing up from the laptop set up in front of him. He has a pile of paperwork to his left and a notebook filled with scribbles on the right. “How is she?”

“Hot and bothered.” I smirk, earning me his undivided attention.

Good to know that’s all it takes to drag him away from his work.

“She’s reading a romance book,” I explain.

He nods in understanding. “And how do you know she’s hot and bothered?”

“Aside from the fact she can’t sit still and her cheeks are flushed?” I unlock my phone and slide the open book across the table for him to find out for himself.

His eyes widen as he reads over the words on the screen. “I’m not sure the doctor cleared her for that.” But his voice is rough with desire.

We’re all hanging on by a thread, made worse by the fact our girl walks around the house in nothing more than one of our shirts most of the time. Not that I’m complaining.

There’s nothing hotter on this earth than seeing Chloe wear my clothes, even if it makes it damn near impossible to keep my hands to myself.

“She’s fine, King. She’s not even taking painkillers anymore, and I haven’t seen her wince in days.”

He sighs and turns back to the screen. “She’ll come to us when she’s ready.”

I shake my head and take a seat beside him, glancing across the papers he has spread across the table. “What are you working on?”

**Another story, whenever you're ready.**

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“Tracking the Vegas’ finances over the last few years.”

“You find much?”

“Other than the yearly lump sum payments from Salvatore Lombardi?”

My brows raise in surprise, but I don’t reply, waiting for him to continue.

“There’s a lot of money going in and out of the accounts that I can’t track. It’s like it leaves their accounts and disappears, which means it’s more than likely connected with the trafficking ring.”

“You think the Lombardis are in bed with the same assholes Vega is?”

“I’m not sure,” he admits. “If they are, it’s not to the same extent as Terrance, but I can’t see any reason why Salvatore would be paying *them* when they were the ones that ended the agreement to unite their families by marriage.” He shakes his head as if it will help it make sense. “I’m going to have Ronan go through the Lombardi accounts with me to see if he has any insights, but even Corbin is confused and this is his bread and butter.”

He’s right about that. If there’s one thing Corbin loves, it’s tracking money through accounts. It might as well be an aphrodisiac for the guy given how much he loves that shit.

I personally couldn’t think of anything worse.

“I was thinking. Don’t you think it’s strange how badly Salvatore wanted Chloe dead?”

He nods slowly. “It never made much sense, but I assumed he thought she could lure Ronan away from the family.”

“I thought about that, but then I was thinking about his insistence that Damon bring them both back. Wouldn’t the priority be Ronan?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Do we know if her parents left anything to her when they died?”

Kingston frowns, turning back to the laptop and clicking through files faster than I can track what he’s doing.

“He did. I haven’t thought about it for years, but there’s a lockbox at a facility in Miami that was left to her in the will. After she first disappeared, Salvatore tried to get access to it, but much to his dismay, they couldn’t be bought off. Chloe is the only signatory, and if I’m not mistaken, they require her fingerprints and a retina scan to give access.”

“I think that’s why he wanted her and why he gave the brothers the order not to torture her in the beginning. He needed her unmarked when he inevitably forced her to go to the lockbox.”

He nods along. “I think you might be onto something, Ry.”

“See, I’m not just a pretty face.” I chuckle.

“You’re not even one of those.” He smirks.

“Our girl would disagree with you there.”

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye, but I don’t miss the soft smile that appears at the mention of Chloe.

“Let me run with this new theory, and I’ll see if we can have the box transferred to another facility. I’d rather not drag her across the country right now.”

“Agreed. Until we have eyes on Salvatore and Mikayla, I think we should stick together.”

I push myself to my feet and move back toward the living room.

I have a book to read if I want to make my girl’s fantasies come true.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# CHLOE

### NOW

Sex should be the last thing on my mind right now.

Not only was I shot and almost died a week ago, but we're currently on the run from multiple people that want us dead.

It's hardly the time for my libido to kick into gear, and yet all I can think about is climbing my guys like a goddamn tree.

It doesn't help that there's not much to do here other than read, and my preference has always been and will always be romance.

What can I say? I'm a sucker for a love story. And it doesn't hurt when there's multiple male characters wanting the same woman.

Closing my Kindle, I glance over at the other couch and find Damon staring at me through icy blue eyes. He finally fell asleep a few hours ago, and the house has been almost completely silent ever since, like we all knew how badly he needed to rest now his mind finally accepted that we were safe.

Dark shadows wash over the house as night falls over the beach. I don't think I'll ever get sick of this place.

I have no idea what's next for any of us, or even if we'll survive to have a future, but if we do, I want to ask Kingston if we can come here regularly. If it's this beautiful as winter approaches, I can't imagine how beautiful the summer will be.

“You okay, Duchess?” His brows pinch together as his eyes move over my face. “You’re looking a little flushed.”

Ryker chuckles from the table, making me startle. I should have assumed he was nearby given how little he lets me out of his sight, but despite his size, he moves like a cat and scares me far more often than I would like to admit.

“That’s because she’s been reading about a girl being railed by four guys for the last few hours.”

If I thought my cheeks were warm before, they’re on fire now. I have no idea how Ryker knows what I’ve been reading, but it’s doing very little for the ache in my core.

It doesn’t seem to matter how hard I’ve tried to reason with my body about why sex is a bad idea right now, my center throbs for them.

The pain is all but gone, only occasionally pinching if I move in a weird way but even that barely registers now, and as the pain fades, the more my need for my guys grows.

Ronan chuckles above me, and I glance up to see his face illuminated by the laptop. “I have to admit, some of those scenes were hot as fuck. I found myself reading along with you more than concentrating.”

“Maybe our girl needs a punishment for distracting you,” Ryker suggests, moving closer to the couch until his huge frame is towering over the back.

“What do you think, D?” Ronan looks over to his brother, who’s now sitting up. His pupils are blown as they track the tattooed hand gliding up the inside of my throat. “Do you think Chloe deserves a punishment or a reward?”

Nerves flutter in my stomach as I wait for him to reply. Not because either option makes me anxious, but because we’re still finding our way after years of resentment. The last thing I want to do is push him when he’s not a willing participant.

“Definitely a punishment,” he finally says, and my heart just about leaps from my chest.

Maybe I fell asleep, because surely this is a dream.

“See, Siren. We can agree on things sometimes.”

A breathy laugh tumbles out as Ronan pushes the shirt I’m wearing higher, uncovering the black lace underwear I pulled on after my shower.

“So pretty,” Ryker murmurs. “Did you put these on for us, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Such a good girl for us,” Ronan croons, brushing his fingers higher up the inside of my thigh.

“If I’m such a good girl, I wouldn’t be getting punished,” I point out.

He chuckles, pinching my hard nipple through the shirt and pulling a hiss of pain from my lips. “Even good girls need to be punished sometimes, Sparrow.”

“We’ll even give you a choice.” Ryker leans further over the couch and guides his fingers over my lace-covered heat, pulling a strangled moan from my throat. “So responsive for us.”

“What’s the choice?” I pant.

“We can plug your pretty ass and take turns spanking you. Or if that doesn’t sound appealing, we could edge you until you’re a sobbing mess. Which would you prefer?” Ryker asks, as if both options aren’t as hot as they are horrifying.

I should not be this turned on by the idea of being punished.

“Where did you get a butt plug from?” Damon asks, his tone impressed rather than passive like usual.

Ryker smirks. “When it comes to Chloe, I am always prepared.”

“He had a box of toys delivered the day after we got here,” Ronan tells us.

“Bro, you’re not supposed to give away my secrets.”

I can’t help the soft laugh that escapes. Watching their friendship and banter has become one of my favorite pastimes.

“Something funny, Sparrow?”

“You two bicker like an old married couple.” I giggle.

“Take that back,” Ryker demands, but he can’t wipe the smile from his lips.

“Someone’s desperate for their punishment.” Ronan smirks. “Don’t worry, baby. You know we’ll always give you everything you need.”

“I need to come,” I whimper.

“I’m sure you do, but that won’t be happening until you’ve taken your punishment like the good girl we know you can be.”

“What exactly am I being punished for?” I ask. If anything, I should be pampered with as many orgasms as I want for putting up with the four of them.

Ryker stares down at me with knowing eyes. “Jumping in front of a bullet for one.”

“Not running when I told you to,” Damon adds helpfully from the other couch.

“Almost dying before I could get to you,” Ronan says.

“And just because we want to.” Kingston’s deep voice comes from the doorway, and my chest tightens at the sight of him.

His white T-shirt sculpts to his body as if it were made just for him, and don’t even get me started on the gray sweatpants he’s been donning all day.

He’s a walking, talking addition to my spank bank.

“Shall we get started, Mama?”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# CHLOE

### NOW

I bite down on my bottom lip as Ronan's hand disappears beneath the neckline of my shirt.

His touch is gentle but maddening, each brush of his fingertips over the swell of my breast driving me higher until I'm wondering if I can come from touch alone.

Ryker's hand drifts up and down the inside of my thigh in a rhythm that simultaneously makes me want to beg for more and plead with him to stop.

There's a voice in the back of my mind telling me this could make or break the fantasy I have in my head. The life where I have four men who love me and don't threaten to kill each other at every opportunity. A life I've tried not to want so I don't get my hopes up.

But I can't lie to myself anymore.

This is what I want, and denying that does nothing for any of us.

Kingston strides closer, each step more confident than the last, until he's standing beside the couch, his dark eyes pinning me in place. "I asked you a question, Chloe."

I swallow heavily. "Yes, I want to get started."

He gives me a satisfied smile before reaching his hand out and I take it immediately.

I have no idea what he has planned for me, but I'm desperate to find out.

"Strip for us, Chloe," Kingston orders as he backs toward an armchair beside the fireplace that gives the room a soft orange glow.

Nibbling on the inside of my cheek, I drag my fingers up my thighs until they hook in the hem of the shirt.

I've never claimed to know how to be sexy, but the way they watch me urges me forward.

*Don't overthink it,* I remind myself over and over.

I drag the fabric higher, making sure each move I make is slow and deliberate.

A soft rumble of groans fills the room when I finally pull it over my head and drop it to the couch I was on just a few minutes ago.

Meeting Kingston's gaze, he gives me a slow nod that tells me to continue without having to utter a single word.

My heart rate kicks up a notch as I slip my fingers beneath the waistband of my panties and slowly lower them. Thankfully bending no longer hurts because the last thing I want is for this to end before it can begin.

I kick the lace away from my feet and meet King's eyes, waiting for my next instructions. His eyes drag over my bare skin slowly, as if I'm a work of art in a museum rather than a woman trembling in front of him.

"So fucking pretty," he murmurs, once again holding out his hand for me to take.

His fingers are warm as they wrap around mine, tugging me to stand between his spread legs.

"You okay, Mama?" he asks quietly.

"Yes," I reply immediately.

He watches me for a beat, searching my eyes for any hesitation but he's not going to find any. Not when I want this more than I want my next breath.

When he doesn't find what he's looking for, he grasps my hips and turns me slowly. Once I have my back to him and I'm facing the rest of the room, he tugs me to sit in his lap.

His hardness presses against my ass, dragging a soft moan from us both as he settles me with my legs spread over his knees, opening me up for the three sets of hungry eyes watching our every move.

“Comfortable?”

“I’m not sure that’s the right word. But I’m not in any pain if that’s what you mean.”

He presses a soft kiss to my shoulder. “Time for your rules, Mama.”

“Rules?”

He huffs out a laugh. “You think you’re going to have four men who crave control fuck you and there won’t be any rules?”

I swallow as my heart kicks up another notch. It’s going to beat right out of my chest before any of them even touch me if I’m not careful. “What are the rules?”

“First, and most importantly, if at any time you are in pain or you’re uncomfortable, you will say your safe word. None of us will be upset if you need to stop or slow down. This is new to us all, and the last thing we want is for it to not be enjoyable for you.”

“What’s my safe word?”

“We’ll go with the traffic light system for now,” Ryker replies. “It’s easy to remember for all five of us.” He glances around the room at each of the guys. “This is a new dynamic, and it’s important that we are all comfortable. Red for stop, and orange for slow down.”

A soft smile tugs at my lips, because of course it’s Ryker that’s worried about everyone’s comfort. He’s been all in on this since he realized this is what I wanted, and he’s done everything in his power to make it happen for me.

Once everyone nods their understanding, Kingston presses another kiss to my shoulder and continues, “Next, you are not to come until you’re given permission. Your punishment will include denial because I don’t want to risk hurting you while you’re recovering, but this is a blanket rule for any scene I am a part of. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” The ache between my thighs throbs, and every time I look down to see his huge hands splayed across my soft skin, I’m shoved closer to an edge I won’t be allowed anywhere near.

“You are to follow any order we give you immediately and without question. The only exception to this is if you need to say your safe word. We are going to do our best not to give you conflicting orders, but this is new and it is going to be a learning curve in the beginning.”

“I understand.”

“Such a good girl,” he croons as one of his hands moves higher, pausing so close to my pussy that I suck in a harsh breath.

“We’ll add to your rules over time as things develop, but for now we’ll keep it simple.” He rests his chin on my shoulder and widens his legs further until mine can’t spread any further. “Now, why don’t you tell us about the book you were reading today?”

Heat rises to my cheeks and I swallow heavily. “Do I have to?” I whimper.

He chuckles. “Yes, you have to. Or did you forget that following orders is one of your rules?”

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t forget. It’s just…”

“You have no reason to be embarrassed, Duchess,” Damon says, tugging my attention to where he’s sitting with his elbows resting on his knees, watching me with such intensity it takes my breath away.

He’s the only one I haven’t been with intimately and the one I’m most nervous to join whatever it is that we’re building here.

Not because I want him any less than the others, or because I’m worried there’s still animosity between us. No, I’m scared that the tension that’s been building between us since we were teenagers is going to destroy me.

“Don’t get shy on us now, Mama,” Kingston murmurs against the shell of my ear, sending a shiver through my entire body.

I pull in an unsteady breath. “It’s the second book in a series about a group of mafia men who find the female main character sleeping in the alley behind their home, and they immediately take her in,” I explain. “The first book focused on growing their individual relationships with her, but there’s been a lot of group scenes in this one.”

“Tell us about one of the group scenes,” Kingston urges.

Heat rushes over my skin, but I force the anxiety down. They’re not doing this to embarrass me, so I have no reason to be worried.

“The female character has had a few encounters with more than one of the guys at once, but one night she blurts out that she wants them all to fuck her at once, and they are more than happy to give her everything she wants. The leader is a bit of a voyeur, and he loves to watch the others with her, so he calls the shots from the corner while the others take their turns with her.”

“And do they fuck all her holes, or do they take turns in her cunt?” Kingston asks.

A soft moan slips from my lips at his filthy mouth. “Her mouth and her pussy, but the leader wanted them all to come inside her. They’re desperate to get her pregnant, and they have a rule that they can only come inside her pussy.”

Kingston groans against my shoulder. “So they have a breeding kink?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“I have to admit, the idea of filling you with so much cum it’s dripping out of you for days does have its appeal, Sparrow.” Ronan’s voice drags my attention to his heated green eyes.

“Is that what you want, Mama? Do you want us to take turns fucking your pretty pussy until you’re dripping with us?”

I suck in a breath and nod.

“Well, we better get started then.” Kingston’s fingers drag through my aching heat. “We don’t want our girl being empty, do we?”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

# KINGSTON

NOW

I've never shared a woman before, and it was never something I expected I would do in my lifetime. But this is what Chloe needs, and if I was willing to spend a decade building a life for her, this seems easy in comparison.

I won't lie and say I wasn't jealous as hell in the beginning, because I wanted her all to myself. I wanted everything. Every moan, every cry of pleasure, and every single orgasm she would have for the rest of her life. But that jealousy disappeared when we were faced with her dying.

Our petty squabbling and distaste for one another no longer mattered.

Giving Chloe the life she wants became the priority, and the idea that she'll never have to be alone, that one of us will always be able to be with her, protecting her, will never be a bad thing.

And honestly, I think there's a chance I've misconstrued my own jealousy from the beginning. Because when I think about watching Ronan and Ryker share her at the cabin, sure, I was jealous that I wouldn't be able to touch her, but I was also turned on as hell.

I've never wanted anything more than I wanted to be a part of that scene with them, giving her more pleasure than she could possibly handle.

That's what tonight is about.

Circling her clit in tight motions, I lock eyes with Ryker and tilt my head to bring him closer.

He rounds the couch, approaching us with golden eyes full of heat. The way he watches Chloe at the best of times can only be described as primal, but right now he looks like he wants to eat her alive.

Without having to be instructed, he drops to his knees in front of her, bringing him to eye level with her.

“You doing okay, Siren?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I need more.”

He chuckles. “You might regret saying that once this is all over.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, he leans forward and presses his lips to hers in a savage kiss.

Chloe’s hips grind against me, her perky ass pressed against my cock and driving me closer to the edge. I’d like to say I have complete confidence in my ability to not embarrass myself, but when it comes to Chloe, I’m almost always holding on for dear fucking life.

His fingers thread through her hair, holding her to him as he kisses her hungrily. “You taste so fucking good, Siren,” he groans, nipping at the swollen pillows. “I’ll never get enough of these lips.”

I keep a steady rhythm on her clit, driving her higher as Ryker kisses her like he can’t breathe without her lips on his.

His other hand wraps around the front of her throat, applying the perfect amount of pressure to make her whine with need, and I can’t help but dip my fingers lower, pressing into her clenching pussy.

I groan. “So fucking wet and tight, Mama. You’re going to feel so good around our cocks.”

“Jesus,” Damon hisses as the sound of rustling fabric fills the room.

“You look so pretty like this, Chloe,” Ronan praises. “You’re going to give us everything we need, aren’t you, Sparrow?”

“Yes,” she whimpers against Ryker’s lips.

I thrust a second finger alongside the first, pumping into her in a slow and steady rhythm, keeping pressure on her front wall to bring her closer to the edge.

I’m desperate to deny her for hours, pushing her right to the brink of oblivion over and over again until she’s a sobbing mess, but tonight isn’t the night for that. We’re all impatient to get inside her and keyed up from almost losing her.

Thoughts of Chloe in the back seat of the SUV fill my mind, the memory of her riding the edge of orgasm for so long tears rolled down her cheeks.

Yeah, I need to make that happen again.

Ryker drops the hand from her hair but keeps the pressure around her throat as his tattooed hand glides down her perfect body.

He doesn't pause until it joins mine between her parted thighs.

Chloe sobs when his fingers press to her clit, her body begging for the orgasm we won't let her have. Not yet.

Not until one of us is inside her, and we've got a long way to go before that will be happening.

"Look at you, Sparrow. You're taking them so well. Like you were made for them, made for us."

His words have her pussy clenching around my fingers. She is so fucking wet that we'll have no problem sliding inside her despite the snug fit.

"So perfect," he murmurs, pushing to his feet and coming to stand beside us.

Ronan turns her head to look up at him, and her lips are quickly devoured by the first boy she ever loved.

He kisses her softer than Ryker did, sliding his tongue along her lips before devouring her moans of pleasure as we drive her higher.

I tear my eyes off her to look over at Damon. His jaw is tight, his eyes wild with need as he watches every move she makes.

There's a ghost of something else in his burning gaze that takes me a moment to place, but perhaps it shouldn't have, because it's the same thing I've seen in the mirror a million times.

Guilt and uncertainty swirl just beneath the lust, flicking into place for a handful of seconds before being overshadowed by his need for Chloe.

A thick finger presses in beside the two I'm pumping inside her, and I meet Ryker's eyes over her shoulder as she cries out.

"That's it, baby. Let them get you ready to take us. Let them stretch your pretty pussy for us."

Ronan's filthy mouth might be the thing that pushes her over the edge at this point. Who would have thought that, out of the four of us, he would be the dirty talker?

Chloe nods frantically, tears staining her cheeks as she stares up at him with love and desperation. “Ro,” she whines.

“I know, Sparrow.” He gathers her hair at the nape of her neck and brings their foreheads together. “You’re doing so good, baby. I’m so fucking proud of you. You’re going to make us feel so good.”

This time it’s Ryker who curses, and I can’t help but chuckle.

Maybe I was worried about sharing for no reason because I’m having a really fucking good time so far.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

Overstimulated doesn't even begin to describe how it feels to have the hands of three men on me at once while a fourth watches.

It's too much and not enough all at once.

I'm desperate to come, to fly over the edge into oblivion, but I'm equally as terrified of the orgasm that awaits me.

Kingston murmurs praise against the shell of my ear while Ronan kisses me so deeply I almost forget to breathe.

Their fingers move in tandem, pushing me higher with every pump, but I have to keep reminding myself I won't be coming anytime soon.

I've seen firsthand how much Kingston enjoys denial, and I'm preparing myself to feel that kind of frustration again.

Ronan drags my head back, his eyes almost black his pupils are blown so wide. "Are you close, Sparrow?"

I nod, a moan escaping in place of an answer.

"I bet you need to come so badly, don't you, baby girl?"

"Yes," I sob.

At the beginning I tried to control my reactions, but now I'm just letting them happen. There's no point hiding myself from them when they can break me so easily.

He presses a kiss to the corner of my lips as Kingston and Ryker double their efforts, driving me so high stars dance in my vision.

“Don’t come, Chloe,” he tells me.

“I can’t,” I cry.

“Yes, you can. You’re going to do exactly as you’re told. You want to know why?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before he continues. “You’re going to do as you’re told because your tight little pussy is begging to be fucked by us, and if you come before you’re given permission, we’re not going to give it to you.” He brings his lips so close to mine I can almost taste them. “If you come without permission, we’ll each use your mouth and come all over your tits instead, leaving you empty.”

As if to drive the point home, he twists my nipples, dragging a hiss of pleasure and pain from my lips.

The thought is hot as hell, but it’s not what I need tonight. I need all of them. I need them to come inside me. I need to feel them dripping down my thighs.

“That’s what I thought.” He smirks.

“It’s too much,” I whine. “I’m too close.”

“I know you can do it,” Ronan encourages. “You’re such a good girl for us. So perfect.”

Ryker groans from where he’s kneeling between my legs. “I don’t think that’s going to help matters.”

He chuckles. “Oh, I think it’s helping plenty. I can hear how she’s gushing for us.”

“Fuck,” I whine, clenching every muscle in my body in the hope it will stop me from falling over the edge.

“It’s right there, isn’t it, Mama?” Kingston murmurs against my ear. “You’re so close your cunt is desperately trying to hold us inside you.”

“Please,” I sob, my release so close black spots fill my vision. “I can’t. Fuck. I can’t.”

Without a word, their hands disappear from my body, leaving me panting in Kingston’s lap like I’ve just run a marathon.

My pussy pulses around nothing, desperately searching for stimulation as the almost orgasm begins to fade.

I should hate this. I should beg and plead with them to let me come, but there’s something about the anticipation, about the frustration and struggle, that makes the release at the end so fucking worth it.

“You’re doing great, Mama,” Kingston says, trailing kisses down my throat and across my bare shoulder.

“Such a perfect whore.” Ryker’s lips drag over my belly, skirting around the fresh bandage Ronan applied after my shower this morning.

“It’s like you were made just for us to share you.” Ronan kisses my lips so softly it’s almost out of place among everything else they’re doing.

Ryker pushes himself to his feet and moves out of the way, shucking his sweatpants as he drops onto the couch I was on earlier.

He pumps his tattooed cock lazily, his gaze moving over my heated body unapologetically.

Why is it so fucking hot watching him pleasure himself while he watches me?

Ronan guides me to look at Damon, and my breath stutters in my chest at the sight. He’s looking at me like he wants to devour me, but he’s made no attempt to come closer. The only time he’s moved was to remove his pants, and my stomach rolls at the idea he doesn’t want this.

I don’t want him to do anything he doesn’t want to do. I don’t want to force him to be a part of something he isn’t sure of.

“He doesn’t think he deserves to touch you,” Kingston whispers. “He’s unsure of his place with you after everything that’s happened.”

I nod slowly, my heart racketing in my chest so hard it borders on pain.

“Do you want me to help you show him how much you want him?”

“Yes,” I murmur without hesitation, because despite finding myself in the middle of four men, I don’t have that much experience. I wouldn’t have the first clue how to make sure Damon knows I want him.

He lets out a pleased hum as one of his hands wraps around my throat while the other returns to my throbbing pussy.

I didn’t know it was possible to feel so much all at once, but I have a feeling I’m going to come to crave it.

“Reach for him,” he instructs, drawing lazy circles around my throbbing clit. “Ask him to come to you.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, worrying it between my teeth as I desperately try to find the courage to do as I’m told.

There’s a voice in the back of my mind that can’t help but remind me that Damon has rejected me over and over again. When we were teenagers, every time I tried to understand why he disappeared from my life like I

meant nothing, and even when I was in the cellar beneath the compound and he finally kissed me.

“He wants you so badly, Chloe,” King assures me. “Can’t you see the tension in his shoulders? Can’t you see how desperate he is to touch you?”

I swallow, nodding slowly despite his hold on my throat.

“I know you’re scared, Mama. But sometimes the scary things are most worth it.”

I suck in an unsteady breath and lift my trembling hand toward Damon.

His eyes drop from mine for the first time since I looked his way, locking on my hand with furrowed brows.

When he makes no move to come closer, embarrassment washes over me in a brutal wave.

He’s going to reject me again.

I’ve allowed myself to be vulnerable in front of him, in front of all of them, and he’s going to walk away.

“Breathe, Mama. Just give him a minute.”

Kingston’s steady presence at my back allows my body to calm enough that I don’t withdraw my hand, but anxiety still riots inside my chest.

Tears gather at the corners of my eyes as I prepare myself for the rejection, but just as I’m about to drop my hand, he moves.

He shifts to the edge of his seat, his gaze searching my face for something. I can see the uncertainty Kingston mentioned warring behind the icy orbs, but I don’t know how to take it away. I don’t know how to prove to him that I want this. That I’ve *always* wanted this.

“Damon,” I murmur.

His jaw clenches at the sound of his name on my lips, but he still doesn’t move.

“He’s about to break, Mama,” Kingston says softly. “He just needs a little push.”

A slow smile tugs at my lips as a burst of confidence finds its way to the surface along with an idea.

The words form on my lips, and before I can talk myself out of them, I set them loose.

“I want you to crawl to me.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

# DAMON

### NOW

I don’t know what I expected to feel watching them with her.

Aside from the road trip from heaven and hell, I’ve gone out of my way to avoid watching them touch her, because my jealous streak has always been a mile wide when it comes to Chloe.

Even seeing Ronan with her when we were teenagers tested me in ways I could never admit at the time. It was like my body and mind couldn’t handle the idea of someone else touching her.

And yet here she is, spread open like a fucking buffet that each of them is enjoying, and the jealousy I prepared myself for is nowhere to be found.

Instead, there’s guilt. I’ve never felt quite as unworthy as I do right now, and it keeps me rooted in place.

Every now and then, I give my cock a hard squeeze. I’m too fucking pent up, and Ronan’s dirty talk isn’t helping matters.

Neither is the front-row view of how her pussy clenches every time one of them says something to her.

It’s maddening, and I almost wish I felt the jealousy I expected.

Surely it would be preferable to the way my stomach rolls.

I don’t deserve to be here.

I don’t deserve to watch her, let alone touch her.

And yet I can’t bring myself to leave.

I’m a selfish bastard for staying, but I already knew that about myself. I’ve always been selfish as hell, but usually I can put Chloe first. I can put her safety and happiness above my own selfish need to make her mine.

Just not this time, it seems.

She reaches out to me, her hand trembling as she waits for me to go to her, but indecision weighs on me. Not because I don’t want her, because she’s all I’ve ever fucking wanted, but because she deserves so much more than someone that has hurt her repeatedly over so many years.

What gives me the right to put my filthy hands on her?

Hurt flashes through her pretty green eyes, the same ones I’ve dreamed of every single night since I was a kid. Even when I tried to convince myself I hated her, it was those eyes that called to me in the dead of night, those eyes that pulled me through the darkest of days.

And my hesitation is putting hurt in them.

I bring myself to the edge of the cushion and hope that’s enough to settle the rejection that stares back at me.

The last thing I want to do is hurt her, but I need to work my own shit out before I touch her. I just have to make it quick.

“Damon.” My name on her lips almost breaks me, but I hold steady.

If I do this, there’s no going back.

This is me accepting sharing the only woman I’ve ever loved with three other men.

This is me giving up everything I’ve worked for so I can keep her forever.

If I let myself have the only thing I’ve ever truly wanted, it means starting over.

And it’s the easiest fucking decision I’ve ever made.

Almost like she knows the moment I make the choice to come to her, a slow smile tugs at her lips, mischief dancing beside the worry.

Every now and then she gets this look in her eye that tells me the menace she hides from the world is about to step out from the shadows, and I wait with bated breath to see what she’s cooking up in that beautiful mind of hers.

Her swollen lips part. “I want you to crawl to me.” Her voice is even despite how worked up she is, and I just about fall off the couch to comply.

I’m a dominant man. I crave control.

But when the woman you've loved your entire life tells you to crawl to her, you get on your goddamn knees and crawl to her.

My knees connect with the soft rug a moment before my hands do. All thoughts of walking away are gone as I move between her thighs, never allowing my eyes to drop.

At this point I think I would crawl through broken glass to get to her, especially when she's spread out like a feast.

"Now what, Duchess?" I ask. "Tell me exactly what you want me to do."

She bites down on her bottom lip as Kingston whispers something in her ear. I never thought I would be okay with someone else calling the shots in the bedroom, let alone someone I've spent most of my life convinced I hate, but he's not doing it in an alpha way. He's not lording his demands over us, and as irritating as it is, he's really fucking good at guiding Chloe when she needs it.

Shaking her head at whatever he said, she brushes her fingers through my hair in a motion that seems entirely too gentle compared to everything I've just watched.

Her eyes hold mine for long seconds, and I can't help but sink into them the way I did when I was younger. When I was naive enough to believe I could somehow have the girl my brother loved, despite being engaged before I said my first word.

"Are you okay with this?" she asks softly, quiet enough that probably only King can hear.

I huff out a laugh, because of course she's worried about me. She's surrounded by four men that would devour her whole given half the chance, and she's checking to make sure I'm comfortable.

It would have been so easy for her to lose this part of herself, to succumb to the bitterness after everything that was taken from her, but she's the same sweet girl I loved all those years ago.

Reaching up, I cup her cheek in my palm and her gaze softens at the contact. "Duchess, have you ever known me to be pressured into anything, ever?"

She shakes her head and nibbles at her bottom lip.

"I want to be here, Chloe," I assure her. "Now tell me what you want me to do, and I'll be more than happy to oblige."

A small smirk tips up the corners of her lips as mischief replaces uncertainty.

Fuck, I love this woman. How did I ever think I'd be able to deprive myself of her for the rest of my life?

"How about you show me how much you want to be here with something other than words."

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

# CHLOE

### NOW

I don't know where this confident version of myself has come from, but watching Damon's eyes flare with heat as he trails kisses down my bare chest makes me think I'm doing something right.

His lips are gentle as they drag lower, taking a small detour to press a soft kiss to the bandage.

I'm not stupid. I know he harbors a lot of guilt about that night and everything that came after it, but I need him to let go of it. I'm alive, and if the fact I'm about to get railed by four men isn't a sign of that, I don't know what is.

He kisses over my mound, and my breath catches in my throat with anticipation, only for him to drag his lips over the inside of my thigh instead.

The sensitive flesh sends a need to my core, and I bite down on my lip to stop myself from begging for him to give me what I need.

Kingston's lips are just as gentle as he presses soft kisses over my shoulder and throat, making my head dizzy with lust.

Being between two men that have spent close to two decades hating one another is surreal. How is it possible that I'm the thing that brought them together? That I'm the reason that they're putting their differences aside for my benefit?

“You seem distracted, Siren,” Ryker says from his place on the couch. “Is Damon not doing a good enough job?”

He growls and bites down on the inside of my thigh, dragging a scream from my throat. The pleasure and pain hit me at once, and my core pulses.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I never thought I’d be able to handle pain during sex, but I’m quickly learning I was very wrong about that.

Damon laps at the bite mark, soothing the sting before continuing his exploration of every piece of skin between my thighs other than where I need him.

“Look at how wet you are for us, Duchess,” he murmurs as his lips glide over my hip bone.

“Please,” I whine.

He chuckles. “Please, what, Chloe? Please fuck you? Please eat your pretty cunt? You’ll have to be specific about what you’re begging for.”

Sucking in a breath, I search for the confidence I had a few minutes ago.

“I need you.”

“I know.” He smirks. “But I want to hear you say it. I want to hear the words on your swollen pink lips.”

Kingston’s lips brush over the shell of my ear. “You’re safe here, Chloe. You can ask for anything you want or need.”

His reminder warms my chest, because I know that. I know that this room is the safest place in the world for me and that the four men surrounding me would never let anything hurt me.

“I want you to eat my pussy.” I force as much confidence as I can into the words, and I’m rewarded with a symphony of groans.

Damon doesn’t make me wait long, moving his lips lower until he drags my aching clit into his mouth.

His tongue laps softly at the bundle of nerves while he presses two fingers to my entrance, teasing me with the tips but never pushing inside.

“Damon,” I cry out.

“Fuck, Duchess. I never thought I’d get to hear you cry out my name.”

“Please.”

“Just be patient, baby,” he croons, dragging his tongue through my center. “You don’t think we’d leave our girl wanting, do you?”

My chest tightens at his words, because it’s the first time he’s said that.

*Our girl*.

Tears blur my vision, and my heart rackets in my chest.

This is insane.

Absolute fucking insanity.

I'm tempted to pinch myself to make sure I'm not in some kind of crazy dream that will break my heart to wake up from.

He slips his fingers inside me but doesn't move them immediately, and it's almost more maddening than when he had them poised at my entrance.

"I want you to hold onto my hair while you grind your perfect pussy on my face. Can you do that for me, Duchess?"

A soft moan tears from my chest.

Can I do that?

Like it's some kind of unreasonable ask.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I pull his face closer to where I need him.

He flashes me a wicked smile before his sinful tongue laves over my swollen clit. His fingers start moving, and stars are once again dancing in my vision.

I'm so close to the edge already, so worked up from everything these men have done to me already and all too aware of how far we have to go.

I want them all tonight. It's greedy and unreasonable, but if the last few months have taught me anything, it's that sometimes it's okay to want everything.

"You look so fucking pretty right now, Chloe," Ronan says as he pumps his hard cock slowly. A bead of precum gathers at the tip that makes my mouth water with anticipation. "You were made for this. Made to be worshipped by us. Made to be our perfect little slut."

I groan and tighten my hold on Damon's hair. The brothers are really doing a number on me right now.

"Do you like being our whore, Mama?"

"Yes," I whine. "I love it."

Ryker's eyes flare with need as he pushes himself to his feet and comes to stand beside us again. I should have known he wouldn't be able to keep himself away for long.

"How does she taste, Lombardi?" he rumbles, but the usual hostility is missing. If I'm honest, it's been absent since the hospital, and my chest tightens with hope that has no place being there.

“Like my favorite meal,” he replies, his mouth never leaving me as I tug his hair harder.

I’m so close it hurts, but I need more, even if my release will be stolen from me at the last moment.

Ryker chuckles as he drops to his knees beside the armchair. He leans over the arm and drags his tongue over my peaked nipple.

“Fuck,” I cry out, the added stimulation shoving me to the edge.

Damon groans. “She fucking loved that. She’s clenching my fingers so tight I can barely move them.”

“Wait until you’re inside her when she does that.” Ryker moves to the other nipple and gives it the same soft treatment.

There’s something about the way they’re talking about my body like I’m not here that drives me higher. It’s fucking addictive being between them, and I don’t think I’ll ever get enough.

“I can’t fucking wait,” Damon admits, sucking my clit so hard I simultaneously drag his face closer and try to shove him away.

I won’t be able to stop myself from coming if he keeps it up, but I also can’t bring myself to beg him to stop.

Ryker nips at the hard peak as Damon’s fingers drag mercilessly over the front wall of my core.

“I’m going to come,” I cry out. “Please. Please let me come. Please.”

The words tumble out of their own accord, and I can’t find it in me to be self-conscious about begging them.

“Not yet, Mama,” Kingston says firmly. “You’ll come when we say, and not a moment sooner.”

But they don’t stop.

Their ministrations are relentless.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I desperately cling to Damon’s hair. It occurs to me that I’m probably hurting him, but the harder I tug, the more fiercely he devours me.

“Oh god. I can’t. Please. I can’t hold it.” I’m pleading now. My body and mind are lost to the fog, and my grasp on my release is slipping.

I don’t want to disappoint them, not when they’re giving me every fantasy I’ve ever had, but I can only hold out for so long before my body takes the reins.

Damon and Ryker share a look, and just as I reach the point of no return, they both pull back, leaving me panting in Kingston’s lap.

A rough sob tears from my chest, my body grieving the loss of the release it so desperately needs.

“You’re doing so good, Mama.”

“Such a good girl for us.” Ryker presses kisses across my collarbone.

“Our perfect girl,” Damon adds, running his hands up my trembling thighs.

“I’m so proud of you, Chloe.” Ronan rounds the chair and comes to stand on my other side. “You’re taking everything we’re giving you so well.”

Their praise warms my chest and makes me cry harder. Emotion purges itself from my body, the fear and grief I’ve been holding on to for so long, the regret and guilt I haven’t allowed myself to deal with.

It comes pouring out as my guys surround me, their hands moving over my body as they offer soft words of encouragement I didn’t know I needed.

How do they always know exactly what I need?

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## CHAPTER FORTY

# CHLOE

NOW

I’m on fire.

My skin. My chest. My mind.

I’m burning up from the inside, and I’m afraid I’m going to explode.

“We can stop if you need,” Kingston offers, his voice calm and even among the storm raging inside me.

I shake my head, but I can’t find the words that beg to be spoken.

“We won’t be upset if this is too much too soon, Sparrow,” Ronan says from beside me. “We don’t want to do this if you’re not comfortable.”

Pressing my eyes closed, I force my body to calm down. Or at least I try. There’s a riot of emotions I can barely place, let alone control, but I can’t let them think I’m not the happiest I can ever remember being.

“I don’t want to stop,” I whisper, not trusting my voice to not waver. “This is just all I’ve ever wanted, and I’m scared the rug is about to be pulled out from under me. I’m scared I’ll wake up and this will all be a dream.”

Ryker’s golden eyes soften, and he brushes his rough fingers down my cheek. “This is happening, Siren. We’re here and we’re yours. I promise the rug is firmly nailed to the ground and it’s not going anywhere, and neither are we.”

“But…” I glance to Damon, who’s still kneeling between my legs. This conversation would make me feel vulnerable no matter how we had it, but being naked between them isn’t helping matters.

He pushes up so we’re at eye level, pinching my chin between his fingers. “I’m not going anywhere, Chloe. I lived most of my life depriving myself of the only thing I ever wanted, and then you almost died in my arms.” He sucks in a breath as pain lances across his face. “Maybe before, I could have kept myself away, I could have convinced myself that you were better off without me, but not anymore. I don’t know how I’m supposed to let you out of my sight, let alone out of my life. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. Not ever.”

He swipes the tears from my cheeks, and I can’t help but lean into his hand.

“I know I’ve fucked up so much with you, but I’m going to put in the work. I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving myself to you, and them, that you are my whole world. Fuck the Lombardi name. Fuck the throne. Fuck all of it. Because a life without you is not a life I want to live. None of it matters if I don’t have you.”

“Now I’m sure I’m dreaming.” I half laugh, but there’s little humor in the sound.

He glances up at Kingston for a beat and then I’m in his arms, straddling his legs, his cock so close to where I need him I can’t help but grind against him.

Damon’s moan is almost enough to send me over the edge. The deep melody of pleasure is so fucking hot I should have known it would come from him. “Jesus, Duchess.”

He wraps his arms around me so tight it borders on pain, but I like it. I *need* it.

“I’m not going anywhere, Chlo. Will you let me prove it to you?”

I don’t answer in words. Instead, I lift my hips and guide his hard cock to my entrance. Just like the rest of my guys, he’s huge, and I silently thank the others for preparing me to take him for the first time.

Sinking down onto his hardness, we let out a mutual groan as tears gather in my eyes again.

Tears of relief.

Tears of pleasure.

Tears for all the years we lost and all the ones ahead of us.

“Fuck.” He swallows heavily.

Damon drops one hand to my hip and keeps the other on my cheek, keeping our faces so close every breath he takes whispers across my face.

Logically I know the others are watching us, that we’re not alone in this perfect moment, but something about that knowledge makes it more perfect.

Because every piece of my heart is here watching as the final one clicks into place.

We don’t move immediately, just enjoying one another for long seconds that could be minutes for all I know. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we’re finally here, that after all these years we found our way to one another.

“You’re perfect, Duchess.” He takes my lips in a slow kiss that takes my breath away, his tongue slipping into my mouth and devouring me with an onslaught of emotions that make my heart burst. “So fucking tight and wet.”

His grip on my hip urges me to move, guiding me to grind on his hardness in a way that has stars dancing in my vision.

It’s intense, but maybe I should have expected that.

“Damon,” I whine as my pussy flutters around him. I’m so close, my mind is long past foggy, and my hips move on instinct and his guidance alone.

“I’ve got you, Duchess. I promise I’ll catch you when you fall.”

The release I’ve been desperate for washes over me in slow, intense waves of pleasure that have me gasping for air.

Damon’s voice is a constant symphony in my ear.

“That’s it, baby. Use my cock. Take everything you need from me. You’re so fucking beautiful when you come for me.”

Each word drags out my orgasm, and when my eyes finally come into focus, I realize how hard he’s trying to hold onto his own composure.

There’s a thick vein running down his arm, and his jaw clenches so hard I’m concerned it’s going to crack. And yet his hold on me is gentle, reverent even.

“You back with me, sweet girl?” he murmurs, and I nod, despite my body still trembling from my release. “I’m never going to get sick of watching you come, Chloe. King’s obsessed with edging you, but I think

I’m going to be obsessed with forcing you to come over and over again until you beg me to stop.”

I gasp at the threat, earning me chuckles from around the room, and it’s only now I remember Damon’s still inside me and hasn’t come.

Rolling my hips, I drag a rough groan from his chest. “You want my cum, Duchess?”

“So badly,” I whimper. “Please, Damon.”

“Fuck,” he rumbles. “How am I supposed to refuse you when you sound so pretty begging for my cum?”

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## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# RONAN

### NOW

If you told me ten years ago that I would enjoy watching the love of my life fuck my brother, I would have laughed and then punched you in the throat for suggesting such a thing.

There was a part of me that always knew they had feelings for one another, and I was never bothered by it, but I knew they wouldn't act on it, especially when they started hating one another.

But love isn't linear. It's not always as simple as having one person you love for your entire life. For me it is, because Chloe is without a doubt my soulmate, but the idea of sharing her with the other men in this room doesn't fill me with jealousy or dread. It settles something inside me. The part of me that wants to give her *everything*, wanting to be with her every minute of every day to keep her safe and happy.

And it doesn't hurt that it's hot as hell watching the way she moves with them, the way they make her come, the way they each give her something she craves.

So the Ronan of ten years ago might not have been able to see this future, but the one of now is fucking ecstatic this is where life has led us.

Damon stares at Chloe with so much adoration I blink to make sure I'm not hallucinating. The change in him has been night and day, because not

even the wall he built between them was strong enough to survive almost losing her.

He glances up at Kingston, silently asking if we're ready to move to the next phase of the night. The fact he's deferring to a man he loathed just a few weeks ago makes my brows raise in surprise, but it's just more proof he wants to be a part of this and he's willing to put in the work, even when it's uncomfortable.

Kingston gives a short nod, and my brother wastes no time carefully repositioning Chloe. He lifts her easily, guiding her back to the soft rug, but he never slips out of her.

"You feel so fucking good wrapped around me, Duchess. I want to spend the rest of my fucking life buried inside this pretty pussy." He withdraws slowly before slamming back into her waiting cunt.

Chloe's cry makes my cock jerk in my hand, and I can't help but give it a few rough pumps. I'm desperately trying to keep myself away from the edge, but my balls tighten with every whimper and moan she lets out.

Like a moth to a flame, I drop to my knees on the rug and move beside them. We allowed Damon to have his time with her, given this is their first time together, but now it's time to share.

Her head rolls to the side, and she gives me a soft smile as I lie beside her. "You okay, Sparrow?"

"I don't think okay cuts it." Her half laugh is cut off by a moan when Damon slams into her wet heat.

"Are you going to take Damon's cum, baby?"

Chloe's pupils blow wide as she bites down on her bottom lip.

Jesus Christ, I'm barely going to get inside her before I blow my load at this rate.

"You're so pretty when you're being fucked like our own personal whore," I praise, and Damon curses.

"Fuck. Me," he grinds out.

I smirk. "Are you driving Damon crazy, baby?"

She nods with a mischievous smile tugging at her lips.

"You drive us all crazy. We're so fucking obsessed with you I don't think you'll ever have more than an hour without one of us fucking you."

"She likes that idea," Damon grunts. "She's clenching me so hard right now."

“Our greedy girl is ready for her first load,” Ryker rumbles from the couch.

“Ask Damon for what you need, Mama.”

Her blush spreads down her chest, and I can’t help but lower my mouth to her hard peaks.

I’ve always loved her tits, always spent as much time as I could justify worshipping them as I could. It seems some things never change.

“Don’t get shy on us now, Duchess.”

Chloe’s lips part on a cry as he drives his point home with a rough thrust that pushes her up the rug.

“Please, Damon,” she sobs. “Fuck. Please give me your cum. I need it. Please.”

Tears of pleasure roll down her cheeks. She’s overwhelmed in the best way, and my cock throbs with the need to get inside her.

It won’t be long before I can sink into her perfect cunt, and when I do, I’m not sure how I’ll last more than a few pumps.

Damon groans as his pace picks up. He has one hand planted beside her head while the other brackets her throat, applying just enough pressure that her eyes flare and her body trembles. “Come for me one more time, Duchess, and then I’ll give you my cum.”

I graze my teeth over the hard bud between my lips, and the bite of pain pushes her over the edge.

Chloe’s screams fill the living room and I barely manage to stop myself from coming.

As soon as she tips over the edge, Damon’s thrusts lose all rhythm as he chases his own release, and she doesn’t have to wait long for what she asked for.

He lets out a roar as he seats himself deep, the tendons in his throat tight while his grip on our girl never falters. Even in the throes of pleasure, he won’t hurt her.

None of us will.

At least not in a way she won’t enjoy.

I pull away from her breast just in time for him to collapse over her, careful not to give her too much of his weight.

Chloe runs her fingers through his hair, and for long seconds the room is silent aside from them panting to catch their breath.

Kingston joins us on the rug, brushing his fingers down her cheek with soft reverence. “How are you doing, Mama? Do you want to stop?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I need more.”

“Jesus,” Damon groans. “She’s still trying to milk me.”

“Our greedy girl.” Kingston smirks before meeting my eyes, and I give a small nod in understanding.

It’s my turn next, and I can hardly wait to get inside her.

Without a word, Damon rolls them and sits up with Chloe straddling his lap. The movement drags another soft whimper from our girl, but she allows us to move her without question.

She trusts us.

All of us.

And I refuse to ever break that trust again.

I push onto my knees behind her, pressing her between us and trailing soft kisses along her shoulder blade.

“Mm, I like being in the middle of a Lombardi sandwich.”

I chuckle, nipping at the sensitive skin beneath her ear. “Maybe we’ll have to fuck you like this one day soon. Damon in your pretty pussy, and I’ll take your perfect ass.”

Her moan and Damon’s grunt are all I need to know she loves that idea.

“You need to take the little minx, she’s strangling me.”

“With pleasure.” I smirk.

Damon pushes up on his knees slightly, lifting her enough that I can slide mine beneath her, and then in a move I’m surprised works, he slips out of her a moment before I sink in, not allowing any of his cum to escape.

If our girl wants to be filled with cum, that’s exactly what she’s going to get.

Banding an arm around her middle, I drop the other to where we’re connected, shifting my hips in slow rolls while she gets used to the position with her back to my chest.

“You feel huge like this,” she whimpers.

“You’re good for my ego, Sparrow,” I rasp, my fingers brushing over her swollen clit.

The new position allows her to see the others and see exactly how ravenous they are for their turn.

Damon lies on the rug beside us with his gaze locked on every move she makes. He’s spent, but he’s not about to miss a single second of this.

I find a steady rhythm of shallow thrusts that make her tremble in my arms and alternate between teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves and running my fingers along where we're joined, occasionally sliding the tip of my finger in beside my cock.

It never occurred to me before Ryker and I first shared her, but now the idea of stretching her perfect cunt around more than one of us at the same time plagues my dreams.

"How do you feel, baby girl?" I murmur against her ear. "How does it feel to have four powerful men on their knees for you?"

A soft whine escapes her throat as I slip a second finger inside her with my cock. "Ronan."

"Answer me, Sparrow."

"I feel full," she moans. "And I feel loved. Worshipped. At home."

Kingston curses, his dark eyes on fire with barely contained possession. He's struggled most with this transition, but he's starting to see how much she needs this, and there's nothing any of us won't do to make our girl happy.

Ryker moves in front of us, his golden eyes moving over Chloe as if he can commit this exact moment to memory. "Do you like being stretched, Chlo?"

She nods, her pussy clenching around me so tight I can barely move inside her. She's been on the edge since I first slipped inside her, but I'm not ready for her to come yet.

Building her up is half the fun after all.

"Do you trust us?" He murmurs the question, and for a fleeting moment I think he's worried about her answer.

He's taken our failures to protect her hard, and the anxiety is written all over his face before he wipes it clear.

"More than anything," Chloe replies without hesitation. She brushes the tips of her fingers down his tattooed chest to the space above his heart, the only skin free of ink.

"As soon as this mess is sorted, I'm getting you right here, Siren." He dips his lips to hers, taking them in soft passes in time with my slow thrusts.

"You guys work *very* well together," she moans.

"I think we could work even better together. What do you think, Ronan?" He hits me with a smirk that tells me exactly what he's thinking,

and I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from blowing before we can try it.

"Fuck yes," I grind out.

"Do you want us to fuck your pussy together, baby?"

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## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

# CHLOE

NOW

I’m beginning to wonder if I fell asleep reading my book earlier and this is all a dream that I can’t seem to wake up from.

Not that I want to.

I can’t get enough of them, and I don’t even care if that makes me greedy anymore. I spent so long thinking I would spend the rest of my life alone, thinking I’d never let anyone close again.

So why shouldn’t I enjoy every second now I have them?

Ryker stares down at me expectantly, as if he hasn’t just asked if I want him to fuck me with Ronan.

Is it even possible to take two cocks at once?

“You’re safe,” Ronan murmurs against the shell of my ear, his thumb brushing along my ribs in comforting passes. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

I swallow heavily, feeling the weight of their eyes on me.

If there’s one thing I know, it’s that these two men would rather cut their own hearts out than ever physically harm me.

Plus, every time I’ve ever read a double penetration scene in a book, I’ve had to locate my battery-operated boyfriend to help me out, so I might as well try it myself now the opportunity has presented itself.

“I want to try,” I murmur.

Kingston brushes his fingers along my jaw, pulling my attention to where he's kneeling beside us. "If at any point you need a break or to stop, you say your safe words, okay?"

"I know." I lean into his touch. "They won't hurt me."

Ryker moves closer until his chest is pressed to mine, and he's staring down at me with so much admiration I can barely believe it's all for me.

The way these men look at me will never stop taking my breath away. Like I'm their entire universe and their reason for breathing.

His eyes drag down my bare body, pausing on the bandage beside my belly button. "You're not hurting?"

"It hasn't pulled once," I assure him.

The worry lingers for a moment longer before he positions himself with his knees against Ronan's. "We'll take this nice and slow."

I nod, dropping my head back against Ronan's shoulder as he pushes us up to allow for the right angle.

I have no perceivable idea how this can work, so I let them move me in whichever way they need, knowing without a doubt that I'm safe in their arms.

"You ready, Siren?" Ryker asks, brushing the head of his cock against my clit in a way that pushes me closer to the edge.

"As I'll ever be." I half laugh, half moan.

This is crazy.

Absolutely fucking wild.

And yet I hold my breath with anticipation as Ryker presses against Ronan, stretching me around his head.

I cry out, pain and pleasure slamming into me so hard I can barely breathe through the conflicting emotions.

"You're doing so good, baby," Ronan says calmly, but there's a strain in his voice that wasn't there before. "Take a deep breath for us. You're okay. You're safe. You can take it."

Ryker's jaw is locked so tight I'm worried it'll snap as he sinks in another few inches.

The burn is unlike anything I've ever felt, but right alongside it is pleasure so deep stars fill my vision, making everything around me hazy.

"Stay with us, Chlo," Ryker says through clenched teeth.

"Are you in pain?" I ask, my brow dipping in concern.

He lets out a rough chuckle. “Physically in pain? No. But my balls feel like they’re about to explode, and I’m not even all the way inside you yet.”

“Oh.”

Ronan snickers behind me. “You need to hurry up, man. If I don’t move soon, I’m going to lose my fucking mind.”

“You’re okay?” Ryker confirms.

I nod. “Overwhelmed, but I’m pretty sure that’s normal.”

His throat bobs as he swallows heavily and pushes the rest of the way inside me, or at least as far as he can given the position and the other cock inside me.

Once again, this is fucking insane.

My body is on fire in the best way. Every nerve ending is lit up as they give me long seconds to get used to the feeling of them both inside me, but somehow I don’t think that’s going to happen.

“I need you to move,” I whimper, my hips taking matters into their own hands. “Please.”

“Jesus,” Damon mutters from where he’s lounging beside us, his eyes locked on where we’re connected. “This might be the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Ryker looks over my shoulder, sharing a look with Ronan before they both move, one pushing deeper while the other retreats, dragging along the place inside me that will set me off like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Wrapping my arms around his tattooed shoulders, I hold on tight, surrendering myself to the sensations. The pleasure. The stretch. The heat from being trapped between their bodies. It’s a lot. And yet I think this might be one of the best moments of my life.

Ronan’s hand glides down my body, only pausing when it reaches my clit. His fingers rub tight circles over the sensitive bundle of nerves, shoving me right to the edge of an orgasm I think might ruin me.

I shake my head, my body vibrating with so many sensations I can’t place them. “I can’t.”

“Of course you can, Sparrow,” Ronan croons against the shell of my ear. “You’re so perfect for us, so fucking beautiful taking us like you were made just for this.”

I’m overwhelmed in the best way, and when Kingston reaches between us and pinches a peaked nipple, I have no other choice than to tumble off the edge.

I plunge into darkness, my mind and body breaking apart as I float through the most intense pleasure I've ever experienced. Every nerve ending fires at once, sending me into a never-ending spiral of ecstasy.

I'm vaguely aware of soft praise and their roars of release as they follow me over the edge, but it's not until gentle fingers cup my cheek that my mind finally tumbles back into my overstimulated body.

The dim light from the fireplace illuminates my guys, but it's Kingston who has me facing him, concern lining his features.

"Are you okay? You passed out for a second there."

"That was…intense." That word doesn't seem adequate to describe the out-of-body experience I just had, but I'm too tired to find another one.

"You're magnificent, Mama." He brushes my cheek with his thumb reverently. "I'm so fucking proud of you."

Heat touches my cheeks, and the need to look away almost wins out, but instead I lean into his touch, savoring this moment with my guys.

We have so much left to work out, so many dangers waiting on the other side of tonight.

But just for one night, I refuse to think about any of them. I refuse to let them ruin this for me.

"I'll go get a bath started for you. A soak will help the aches." Kingston moves to stand, but my hand shoots out, grasping onto him before he can get to his feet.

"We're not done yet."

"Mama, you're exhausted. There will be plenty of other nights for us to share you, but you're tired and are barely recovered from being shot and almost dying."

I'm shaking my head before he can even finish speaking, because there's no chance I've come this far just to leave one of my guys out.

"King," I murmur. "I need you to fuck me. I need to feel you all inside me."

His eyes darken, his jaw working as he clings to the reasons he shouldn't, but then his eyes lock on the tears gathering at the corners of my eyes and the indecision disappears.

Ryker chuckles. "You have him wrapped around your little finger, Siren. He just folded like a house of fucking cards."

"She has all of us wrapped around her finger," Kingston points out. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

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## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

# KINGSTON

NOW

When Chloe told me her heart would never belong to just me, I was filled with so much jealousy I could hardly breathe.

She was mine, and I'd spent a decade molding a life that was fit for her. Houses that were decorated the way she would want all over the world, enough staff that I would rarely have to leave her, and most importantly, safety.

The idea of sharing her with anyone else, especially two men that had dedicated much of their lives to hunting me for a sin I didn't commit, was inconceivable.

But I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong, and I was very fucking wrong about this.

Now that I've accepted that this is how the future looks, I can't imagine going back to how I thought things should be.

Ronan and Ryker are still buried inside her, but the tight set of their jaws tells me it's getting uncomfortable.

"Lay her on the rug," I order softly.

If this is what she wants, I'm going to give it to her, but it will be on my terms, making sure she's not exerting herself any further tonight.

She's done more than enough.

They work together, first tipping her forward onto Ryker’s chest so Ronan can move out of the way, and then they lay her down until her body is spread across the rug and she’s staring at Damon with the same love she looks at the rest of us.

I don’t know how the four of us got so fucking lucky.

We’re the villains in her story, each of us hurting her in some way to bring us to this moment, but she loves us anyway. She’s handed us her heart and her body without hesitation, and we’re going to spend the rest of our lives doing everything we can to be worthy of her.

Ryker kisses her slowly, his lips gliding over hers as she drags her nails down his back.

I don’t know how she could possibly still need more, but that’s just another reason she needed all of us.

Our girl is insatiable, and it’ll take the four of us to keep her satisfied.

He murmurs something against her lips, and her bottom lip trembles slightly before she responds just as quietly.

Pressing one last kiss to her lips, he sits back, and I quickly take his place, sliding right into my favorite place in the world.

A deep groan escapes my throat as I lower over her, holding myself deep inside her perfect pussy as I trail soft kisses over her cheek and down her throat.

“You feel so good, Mama,” I murmur. “So fucking perfect.”

“King,” she whimpers as she wraps her arms around me and holds me to her tight.

“I’ve got you, baby girl.”

I drag my hips back before thrusting in harder this time, unable to help myself. The need to make love to her is just as strong as my need to rut into her so hard she feels me for a week.

Not that it matters. She’s going to be feeling tonight for days, and the caveman in me will be smug as hell every time she winces from the ache between her thighs.

Ronan lies beside us, his fingers brushing through the auburn strands. His love for Chloe is different to the rest of us. It stems from innocence and shared firsts, and they’ll have a bond we’ll never understand, no matter how much time passes.

The Kingston of a few weeks ago would have blown a gasket with that information, but now it fills me with pride.

I set a steady pace, reveling in how wet and warm her sweet pussy is. I haven't even finished yet, and I already can't wait to fuck her again, and if that doesn't tell you how obsessed I am, I don't know what will.

Chloe's eyes are glassy, and she hasn't stopped trembling from her last orgasm, but the way she looks up at me makes my chest tighten impossibly.

I never knew it was possible to love someone the way I love her.

"Have you got one more for me, Mama?"

Her eyes widen as she drags her bottom lip between her teeth. "I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can, Sparrow," Ronan rumbles. "You want to milk King, don't you? Don't you want his cum?"

Her bottom lip wobbles as she nods. She's not upset or hurting, that much I'm sure of, but I think she's a little overwhelmed, which is only normal after everything we've done to her.

I pick up the pace of my thrusts, angling my hips to drag my cock along her front wall with each pump, and with each one her cries grow louder.

She's right there.

"That's it, Chloe," Ronan encourages. "Just one more and then you can rest. Look at how well you take everything we give you. Such a perfect little slut for us. I'm so proud of you."

The mixture of praise and degradation shoves her to the edge, and then she's tumbling.

Her scream fills the house as her pussy locks down around me, giving me no choice but to follow her over the cliff.

My balls tighten to the point of discomfort, followed by the most intense pleasure I can ever recall.

Somehow, I manage to keep thrusting, keeping fucking her through our releases, before finally collapsing over her, careful not to give her too much of my weight.

The room falls quiet, and for a few blissful minutes, I allow myself to soak up this moment, this life we're building together.

Any concern I had about jealousy is gone, because if we can each watch our girl get fucked within an inch of her life, I think we're going to be just fine, and that means all we have to do is rid ourselves of the threats hanging over our heads.

That just might be easier said than done.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

# RONAN

### NOW

Testing the temperature of the water, I give Ryker a nod before he slips Chloe into the bathtub.

She lets out a soft moan, her brow dipping as the warm water soothes her sore muscles, but not enough to make her open her eyes. She's not asleep, but she is floating somewhere between consciousness.

"Get in with her," he whispers, and I don't hesitate.

Sliding into the bath behind her, she nestles between my thighs, dropping her head back against my chest where the "Sparrow" tattoo rests over my heart.

Having her in my arms like this is a dream I never thought would happen again, but now that I have her back, I have no intention of ever letting anything come between us again.

"You did so good, Chlo," I murmur against the top of her head.

"I love you," she replies sleepily. "I never stopped loving you, but now it feels like so much more."

My chest bursts at the words I've been trying not to blurt out at every opportunity. I know she's said it to the others, and I was more than happy to be patient and wait my turn, but I won't lie and say it's not a relief to hear them come from her pretty pink lips.

“I love you too, Sparrow.” I swallow past the lump of emotion lodged in my throat. “With every single piece of me.”

Ryker places a bottle of body wash and a sponge on the edge of the bath, his golden eyes at peace as he watches us.

He knew even before the rest of us that this whole sharing thing was going to work out. He could see the vision that none of us could in the beginning, but one by one we’ve come around, and Chloe is thriving because of it.

“How do you feel, Siren?”

“Sore.”

I scoff, tightening my hold around her. “I’m not surprised, baby girl. We weren’t too rough with you?”

She shakes her head, soft strands of hair brushing over my chest. Ryker pulled it up into a messy knot for her before we got her into the bathtub, and I’m not sure I want to know how he knew how to do that. “Definitely not. You all read my body like it was your own, like you could tell where the line was, and you never came close to crossing it.”

Ryker grins down at her before dropping a kiss to her lips. “You’re perfect for us.”

She preens, reaching out to take his tattooed hand in her much smaller one, and I allow my eyes to fall shut as I soak in this moment.

Before long, he squirts a liberal amount of body wash onto the sponge and washes every inch of Chloe’s body, even the parts that make the blush on her cheeks spread down her neck.

Once he’s satisfied with how clean she is, he scoops her out of the bathtub and carries her to the vanity to dry her off.

I let out the water and grab a towel before stepping out of the bathroom to make sure the bed is ready.

We’ve all been sleeping in the master with her since we arrived in Maine, but there’s only room for two of us in the bed while the other two take mattresses on the floor.

Kingston and Damon sit on the edge of the bed talking in hushed whispers. They each have damp hair, telling me they grabbed a quick shower while we were cleaning our girl up.

They both look up when they hear me tugging a pair of sweatpants on.

“How is she?” Damon asks, concern lacing his tone.

“She’s good. A little sore, but that’s to be expected.”

He nods, glancing behind me to the open doorway before settling back on me. “We need to have a family meeting in the morning.”

I raise a brow. “A family meeting as in all five of us?”

“I’m in this, Ronan. I lived most of my life depriving myself of the only thing I ever wanted, and I have no intention of ever being without Chloe again.” He glances between us and sighs. “Plus, it seems I don’t hate being stuck with all of you.”

Kingston snickers. “Such high praise coming from you.”

I chuckle and move further into the room. As badly as I want to hold Chloe tonight, it’s my turn to take the floor. Only one of us has had to rotate because my brother has been happy to take the floor, but I have a feeling after tonight, he needs to hold her. “What is this family meeting regarding?”

“The future. I want to know what comes after we deal with the threats. And I want to make sure Chloe knows we’re not going anywhere…even if we do occasionally want to kill each other.”

Before we get the chance to respond, Ryker carries a sleeping Chloe into the room, her head resting on his wide chest.

The sheets are already pulled back, allowing him to slip her between them easily. He lifts the blankets up to her neck, his brows pulled together as he makes sure she’s warm enough.

“We should have had her drink some more water,” he says.

“She had a whole bottle, Ry. She’s okay,” Kingston assures him.

“I filled up her emotional support water bottle as well so she can have some if she wakes up throughout the night,” Damon adds.

I can’t help but laugh at the description. Chloe said it a few times in the hospital, and it’s caught on with the rest of us since.

“Let’s get some sleep. Corbin messaged earlier. It looks like we’ve finally had some movement,” Kingston tells us.

I cross to the bed and drop a kiss to Chloe’s forehead, reveling in the feel of her.

Tonight we got a glimpse of the rest of our lives, and I for one can’t fucking wait to start living it.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

# CHLOE

NOW

Darkness surrounds me as my body pulls me from sleep, but it takes me a few minutes to recognize what woke me up.

Ice-blue eyes stare down at me as his fingers drag down my bare side. It's not the first time I've woken up to Damon staring at me, but it is the first time he's been on the bed beside me when it happens.

"You should be sleeping," I murmur, not wanting to wake the others up.

"I like watching you sleep," he admits.

"I'm starting to think you and Ryker don't get along because you're too similar." I roll my eyes, but I can't hide the smile from my voice.

So what if I love that they like to watch me sleep? It's hardly the most out-of-the-ordinary part of this entire situation.

He smirks but doesn't deny it, instead gliding his fingers over my peaked nipple.

I bite down on my bottom lip to catch the hiss of pleasure his touch evokes, my hips shifting restlessly.

There's no way I should be horny. The four of them just fucked me within an inch of my life, my pussy should be a no-go zone for at least a couple of days.

And yet I can feel myself growing wetter with each pass of his fingers.

"You're insatiable."

“I don’t know how I went a decade without sex if this is what my libido is like.”

He chuckles, tugging me closer until I’m plastered across his chest, his lips trailing over my jaw, nipping at the sensitive skin as he goes.

As if my body has a mind of its own, I grind down on his thigh, earning me a deep, rumbled growl.

He pulls back, staring down at me with so much emotion I can barely believe it’s the same eyes that have spent years looking at me with nothing but contempt, and then his mouth is on mine.

His tongue sweeps across my lips, demanding entry that I don’t hesitate to give him, desperate for everything he has to give me.

I grasp his shoulders, desperate for more as I reach between us and fist his hard cock.

“Jesus, Chloe,” he grunts.

“I need you,” I whimper, lifting my hips enough that I can notch him at my entrance. “Please, Damon.”

He nips at my lips, the bite of pain only making me need him more. “How am I supposed to deny you when you ask so nicely?”

Taking his words as permission, I slowly sink down onto him until he’s seated inside of me.

“Oh fuck,” I whimper, shifting my hips to grind my clit on his skin.

Damon’s jaw locks tight as his hands rest on my hips, holding me in place. “You gotta be quiet for me, Duchess. You don’t want to wake the others, do you?” He thrusts up into me. “Or maybe you do. Maybe you want them to see how hard you come on my cock.”

**A novel for your next quiet moment.**

Find something to read on Lokepub.

I bury my face in his throat, desperately trying to muffle my moan.

Perhaps I should have known it would be like this with Damon. All-consuming and intense even in the dead of night while the rest of the world sleeps.

“You feel so fucking good, Duchess,” he murmurs against the shell of my ear. “Like your pussy was made for me.”

Nodding against him, I match his thrusts from below, desperate for the release rushing toward me. I don’t even know how it’s possible to have another orgasm after how many I had earlier, and yet here we are.

“Sit up for me, Duchess. I want to watch you ride my cock.”

I clench around him, forcing my sore body to do as he says. There are muscles I didn’t know existed aching from what transpired between us tonight, and even though the bath soothed them, I think I’ll be feeling it for at least a few days.

Damon’s gaze drags down my naked body as he helps me set a slow rhythm so as not to jolt the bed.

I’m shocked we haven’t already woken them up, but maybe they’re just as worn out as I am.

“So fucking perfect,” he groans, his hands tightening on my hips. “I always knew you belonged on a throne, Duchess.”

His soft praise brings me closer to the edge I’ve been dancing on since the moment he slipped inside me, and I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop the scream building in my throat.

Damon moves one of his hands from my hip and his thumb finds my throbbing clit. “Come for me, Chloe. Let me feel you come around my cock, baby.”

Using one hand to steady myself on his chest, I bite down on the other to catch the cries of pleasure that try to escape when my orgasm slams into me, taking my breath away.

He thrusts up into me, dragging every ounce of pleasure from me before he allows himself to follow me over the edge and fill me with hot ropes of cum.

I collapse on top of him, the aches from earlier returning all at once and making it impossible to hold myself up for even a moment longer.

Is this how it will always be? Will we always be insatiable for one another? Or at some point will our desire fall to a reasonable level?

Damon’s arms tighten around me, holding me against him so tight it borders on pain, but I don’t mind it. After living so much of my life thinking he despised my very existence, this is everything I could hope for.

“I love you,” Damon whispers. “I promise I’m going to spend the rest of my life repenting for every second of pain I caused you.”

I shake my head. “Just being here with me is enough, D. Loving me is enough.”

“It will never be enough, Chloe. I could spend fifty lifetimes trying to make it up to you, but it wouldn’t be enough.”

“Are you two about done?” Ryker’s sleep-rumpled voice has my eyes flying open to the other side of the bed, where he’s smirking at us. “How many times are you going to make me come without having to touch me, Siren?”

I glance down and notice the wet patch seeping into the sheets, and I can’t help but giggle against Damon’s chest.

I guess this is what true happiness feels like.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

# RYKER

NOW

After my middle-of-the-night wet dream courtesy of Chloe and Damon, I manage to get a few more hours of sleep before the sun peeks around the edge of the curtains.

I slip out from between the sheets and take a moment to look at the people that have become my family. It's only been a few weeks, but I know with absolute certainty that this is forever.

There's no other option, because there's no chance any of us give Chloe up, and I'm weirdly okay with that.

Tugging on a pair of sweats, I head downstairs to the gym.

I'm not used to being cooped up like this. Even when I was guarding Chloe at the De Marco estate, I always had something to do. I was working cases for Kingston on the side, helping Corbin with computer shit, and the other guards were usually down to spar.

But our constant need to keep an eye on our girl has meant a lot of time just hanging around the house, and it's beginning to get to me.

Spotting gloves beside the punching bag, I decide hitting something will probably be enough to get me through another day of waiting and make quick work of securing them.

I start slow, not wanting to exhaust myself too quickly, and although I would love to hit this bag until I can no longer lift my arms, we could have

to move at any second.

A light workout will have to do.

I lose myself to the sound of leather on leather, my knuckles aching with the force I hit the bag with despite the gloves.

Sweat drips down my bare chest, my hair is soaked, and I'm panting so hard it sounds like I've just run a marathon, but I don't stop.

At least not until the door opens behind me and I glance up to find Kingston in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Feeling better?"

I shake my head as I tear one of the gloves off and take a long drink of water. Considering Kingston hardly spends any time in this house, it's fully stocked, including the fridge in the corner of the gym. "I won't feel better until we deal with the threats."

"I just spoke with Corbin. Salvatore has been seen leaving the Lombardi compound."

Now he has my attention.

"On the surface it looked like they were running errands. They went to the bank, visited his accountant's office, and had a meeting with a group of their runners."

"Why would he do any of those things for himself?"

"He wouldn't. When they left the final meet, Corbin had one of the teams stay at that location, and lo and behold, Mikayla Vega left twenty minutes after Salvatore."

"So they are working together."

"Seems like it."

"If we could figure out when they're meeting next, we might be able to take them out at the same time on neutral territory."

He nods. "My thoughts exactly. Not having to split up would probably make Chloe feel more secure about this whole thing as well. I know she's anxious about one of us getting hurt."

I frown. I've done my best not to mention the impending murder of her father-in-law and Damon's ex-fiancée around her because I haven't wanted her stressed while she's recovering, but maybe I was just lying to myself.

Of course she's worried. Her heart is so big and she feels so deeply, it only makes sense that she would be afraid of us not coming home to her.

"Corbin is working on tracking Mikayla's movements since we saw her leave the farmhouse to figure out when they might meet again."

“We could use the brothers as bait,” I suggest.

He glares at me. “Didn’t we just discuss how stressed our girl already is? Do you really think putting them in the firing line is going to help matters?”

“I’m not saying put them in actual danger. I’m saying there are two things that Mikayla and Salvatore both want. Damon and Chloe. There’s no way in hell we’re using her as bait, but he can take care of himself, and we’ll make sure we’re close by in case anything goes wrong.”

Kingston pinches the bridge of his nose the way he always does when he’s irritated by the options presented to him. He knows I have a point. He knows this is our best play, but he’s right, Chloe will freak the fuck out if we tell her this is our plan.

“We’ll discuss it at the family meeting,” he finally says.

“We’re actually doing that?”

That earns me another glare, but he doesn’t bother responding, instead turning on his heel and heading toward the kitchen.

Now I just have to figure out how the hell I’m going to talk them into my plan.

Maybe another round with the bag will help me think it through.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

# CHLOE

### NOW

I stretch out my sore muscles as I pad down the steps to the kitchen, where my guys are making breakfast. Or at least that's what I assume they're doing based off the mouthwatering smell of bacon wafting through the house and all the banging and crashing coming from this part of the house.

Stepping around the corner, I stop dead in my tracks at the sight before me.

Ronan is covered in flour, his black shirt far closer to white than it was when he put it on. Beside him, Damon scowls down at a recipe with a block of butter clenched in each hand.

Whatever's happening by the stove seems to be going better because Ryker has one hand buried in his pocket while the other holds a pair of tongs, occasionally moving the contents of the pans around so they don't stick.

Kingston stands by the toaster, his back to the disaster happening in the middle of the kitchen, and I can't swallow the giggle that forces its way out at the complete chaos I've walked into.

They all look up at once, their eyes heating when they see I'm wearing nothing but an oversized shirt I think belongs to Ryker and touches just above my knees.

Wait until they realize I’m not wearing anything underneath because I couldn’t bring myself to put panties on my oversensitive pussy.

“Good morning, Siren,” Ryker calls from the stove. “Breakfast will be ready in a minute. Apart from whatever these two are trying to make.”

“Croissants,” Ronan grumbles, and I’m as amused as I am warmed by the fact they’re trying to make one of my favorite foods in the world.

I step forward until I’m on the opposite side of the island to the mess the brothers have made. “That’s very sweet of you guys. Thank you for thinking of me.”

“We’re going to figure this out,” Damon assures me.

“I tried to tell them how advanced a recipe it was,” Kingston says as he butters a piece of toast. “But the stubborn Lombardi blood runs strong in these two.”

I giggle, unable to hold in my amusement for another moment. “I appreciate it nonetheless.”

“Once we’ve removed the threats, we’ll take a trip to Paris so Chloe can eat her fill of croissants and the kitchen never has to be assaulted by this much flour again,” Kingston offers.

He barely manages to duck out of the way of the flying stick of butter coming at his head.

Ryker wanders around the island and slides a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me, making my stomach rumble so loudly every set of eyes in the room looks my way.

“Hungry, Mama?” Kingston asks, dropping a piece of toast onto my already overflowing plate.

“It was probably the midnight fucking that sent her appetite over the edge.”

Heat spreads across my cheeks and down my throat as my eyes widen at Ryker’s words.

Damon’s icy gaze turns on him, and for a moment I hold my breath, waiting for the distaste for one another to return. But instead, a smug smirk tugs at his lips.

“You’re just jealous it wasn’t your dick she was riding.”

My lips part in surprise as laughter fills the kitchen.

In all my wildest dreams about how this relationship could possibly work, it was never quite this good.

“Eat, Mama.”

I glance down at my plate, my stomach letting out another excited growl before I pick up the toast and take a bite.

I think Ryker might be right. I did work up an appetite.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

# CHLOE

NOW

After breakfast, Kingston leads me into the lounge room and tugs me into his lap in the same chair we started last night in.

I half expected the room to stink of sex this morning, but I'm pleased to find that one of the guys must have cleaned up in here before they came to bed.

The others file in one by one, taking seats around the room while King's fingers trail up and down my back. I'm starting to think I should have put more clothes on before I came downstairs because being in this room with his hands on me, knowing I don't have any panties on, is giving me ideas I absolutely should not follow through on.

"You called this meeting, you can start." King nods to Damon sitting on the couch to our left, his elbows resting on his knees as he watches me closely.

I wonder if it will ever not be overwhelming to have their undivided attention on me, or if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in a perpetual state of blushing.

"I owe you each an apology, or probably more than one if I'm honest. I'm sorry for the parts I've played in this shit show we've found ourselves in. I'm sorry for not being honest when I joined you guys on the jet after Dad had his guys beat me to hell. The ultimatum he gave me was…

unthinkable, and my desperate need to cause Chloe as little pain as possible clouded my judgment."

"Damon," Ronan says, but his brother holds up his hand.

"Let me get this out." He shakes his head as if it will clear the chaos away and allow him to get his thoughts straight. "I've fucked up at every turn, and I'm man enough to admit that, but I want you all to know that I'm in this. All the way, both feet, can't see a way out in this, as long as you'll have me."

I reach out to him, needing to comfort him in some way, and he takes it in his immediately, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"There was never any question," Kingston tells him. "It's obvious how much you care about Chloe and how much she cares for you. So as long as you treat her well and don't try to kill the rest of us, we're not going to turn you away. Not ever."

He nods, his shoulders losing some of their tension.

"But there is something I want to ask you," King continues. "It doesn't matter what your answer is, it won't change anything between the five of us, but I just need to know so we can make decisions about what comes next."

Damon nods slowly, and I give his hand a squeeze in support. I have no idea where this could be going, but nerves roll over me nonetheless.

"Do you want to be the leader of the Lombardi family?"

"No," he answers immediately.

King sighs. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear, Damon. I want the truth. None of us are going to judge you if you want to take over the family. It's what you worked your entire life for, it's the reason you gave up on Chloe despite how desperately you wanted her. But we need to know what the plan is once Salvatore is dead. I need to know if we need to move Hawk's home base to Miami so we can all be together."

He opens his mouth to reply before snapping it shut again. "You would do that?"

"I would do *anything* to make Chloe happy, and I know her well enough to know that she will not be happy if we're not together. Giving our girl the life she deserves is my number one priority, and that won't always be the easiest option. But we'll pivot and we'll make it work."

Damon looks to his brother. "What are you going to do when this is over?"

He shrugs. “I’m not sure. This is the first time in my life that my future hasn’t been chosen for me, and I figured I would take some time to decide what I want to do. Maybe I’ll choose to be a stay-at-home husband and spend my days making sure our girl has everything she could possibly want and need.”

“That was my plan,” Ryker says.

“You want to retire?” King asks incredulously.

“Maybe not completely, but I don’t want to be away for long periods of time anymore. Everyone in this room knows how short life can be. I don’t want to spend it away from the woman I love.”

Tears fill my eyes with each word out of their mouths. They’re each making choices for their futures based on me. What will make me comfortable. What will make me happy. What gives them the most time with me. And I can hardly breathe through the love bursting in my chest.

I gave up believing that everything happens for a reason a long time ago. When you’ve lived through watching your parents be murdered in front of you before running for your life with nothing and no one, it becomes difficult to imagine how there could be a reason for the shitty things that happen.

But now I get it.

I had to wait a long time. So fucking long that I gave up hope, but I can’t say I wouldn’t do it all again to end up here with my guys.

Every second of pain, every broken heart and tear I’ve cried, brought me to this moment, and I’ll never take a second of this life for granted.

Ronan reaches forward and brushes a tear from my cheek. “Happy tears?”

“The happiest.”

I glance over at Damon and find him watching me.

“What do you think, Duchess?”

“Me?” I frown.

“Yeah, you. If you were me, what would you do about the Lombardi empire?”

I nibble at my bottom lip, unsure how honest I should be. I don’t want to lie to him, but my answer is biased by the horrors I’ve lived through on that property.

Sucking in a deep breath, I give his hand another squeeze. “If it were me, I would burn the whole thing to the fucking ground.”

Ryker chokes on a laugh while Kingston’s body vibrates with amusement beneath me.

“Fuck, Mama. I think I like it when you’re a little ruthless.”

But I can’t drag my attention off Damon. The conflict that was there moments ago disappears, and peace takes its place.

“You heard the lady, let’s burn it all to the ground. I don’t want a legacy that’s brought my family nothing but pain.”

This time when tears spring to my eyes, I don’t try to stop them from falling, because he’s talking about us, and I really fucking love the idea of being part of this family.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

# CHLOE

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

I wake with a start, my heart beating too hard in my chest as I desperately try to convince my mind it was just a dream.

The unfamiliar surroundings and uncontrollable beeping only make things worse, and when I realize I'm in a hospital, panic like I hoped I would never feel again hits me.

They're going to find me, and everything would have been for nothing.

"Mama," a familiar voice rumbles, and I glance over to find dark brown eyes watching my every move with a furrowed brow. "You're safe, Chloe. I promise, you're safe."

I shake my head. "They'll find me."

"No, they won't," he assures me. "I admitted you under a different name. They won't start looking at medical records in a different state with a different name until they confirm you're no longer in Miami, and by then you'll be well and truly discharged."

He sandwiches my hand in both of his, and after a few moments the beeping I now realize is my heart rate settles down.

"I won't let them find you, Mama. Trust me to take care of everything. I promise I'll keep you safe."

My eyes wander around the room again, and I try to remember how I got here. The doctor visited me at the penthouse, but I don't remember her saying anything about going to a hospital. After that there's nothing. Not until I just woke up.

"Why am I here?" I ask as I drag my attention back to Kingston. He's dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a Henley that fits him almost too well, but it's the agony on his face that makes my stomach sink.

He sucks in a breath and squeezes my hand in quiet support. "I woke you up when I noticed you had a fever, and you told me you didn't feel well. I pulled the blankets back and you were bleeding." He swallows as the color drains from his face. "There was so much blood, Chlo. I got you here as quickly as I could, but by the time I did, you had to be rushed into surgery."

"The baby," I croak, resting my hand over my lower stomach but I already know what he's going to say. He's about to tell me they're gone. That the little piece of me and Ronan was taken from me just like everything else.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'm so fucking sorry." Tears gather in his eyes, and my chest tightens with the need to comfort him right alongside my own shattered heart.

The pain in my chest is worse than any physical pain I can imagine. It's like my heart is being torn from my body and ripped apart, and I don't know how I can ever come back from this, how anyone could.

"The doctor said it's just one of those things. The pregnancy was early, which makes it hard to know what caused it. They said there's no reason that you wouldn't be able to carry a healthy baby in the future, if that's what you want."

I press my eyes closed, the idea of ever putting myself through this kind of pain again making me sick to my stomach.

My doctors told me over and over again that it was unlikely I would ever fall pregnant naturally, and I thought this baby was a sign that I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Instead, it seems like just one more thing to hurt me.

Tears roll down my cheeks as a violent sob tears through my chest, and when Kingston envelops me in his arms, I can't help but lean into his comfort.

What if this was my only chance to be a mom and now it's gone?

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## CHAPTER FIFTY

# RYKER

NOW

"Absolutely not," I snap when Chloe steps into the room wearing black cargo pants and a matching long-sleeve shirt, complete with combat boots.

There is no chance she's coming with us. Over my dead fucking body.

She sighs. "Kingston already said I could come."

"He what?" I growl. I know I promised to stop trying to kill them whenever they pissed me off, but surely this is extenuating circumstances.

"It's better that we don't split up," the man himself answers as he steps off the bottom step. "Leaving Chloe and Ronan here could leave them open to an ambush. This way all of our resources will be in one place."

"No."

"Ryker. Please be reasonable." Kingston sighs.

"I am being reasonable. You're the one that's lost your fucking mind."

"I want to come," Chloe adds helpfully.

"In every other instance, what you want is the most important thing to me. But not in this one. Not when you could get yourself killed. Not when you've just recovered from almost dying!"

I've always prided myself at being good in a high-stress situation, but every time the idea of Chloe being in danger crosses my mind, my entire body locks up, and panic takes hold.

If this is what it feels like to not be a sociopath, I don't fucking like it. I'll take me and my murderous tendencies over this any day.

"The others agreed this is the best way forward."

I turn my glare on Kingston once more. "You three made this decision behind my back and thought it wise to spring it on me at the last second?"

Their death is getting more and more likely by the second. How am I supposed to trust them with Chloe's life when these are the kinds of decisions they're making?

She steps forward and wraps her arms around my middle, her head coming to rest on my chest, and I can't help but soften.

Goddammit.

Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her there for long seconds, breathing in her soft vanilla scent. I've been addicted to it since the first time she walked past me at the De Marco estate, and my obsession has only grown as time has gone on.

"I don't want to split up, Ry," she murmurs. "It'll make me sick with worry if you're in a different state and I'm stuck here hoping that you're going to come home to me."

"Siren, I will *always* come home to you. There's nothing that could keep me away from you."

She sighs. "You don't know that, and if something happens…" Her words cut off on a sniffle. "I need to be nearby, and I need you to understand that."

I tighten my hold on her and eye the motherfuckers behind her. I'm pissed as hell that they agreed to this without talking to me, but I suppose I get it.

Chloe bats those lashes at me, and I fold like a house of fucking cards.

"Fine. But you will follow every single order we give you. You will not run into danger. You will not get any ideas about rescuing us if shit goes sideways. You will stay where we put you, and I will not hesitate to chain you up if you fight me on this."

Her eyes flare with heat, and I curse. This woman is insatiable.

I walked into the bathroom half an hour ago and found her bent over the basin with Kingston thrusting into her like he would die if he even considered pulling out of her perfect cunt, and truthfully, I get it.

I feel that way every damn time I slide into her slick warmth.

“I’ll be good, I promise.” She smiles up at me. “I’m not going to put you all in more danger just because I want to be involved. But I need to be close by if something happens.”

And by “something happens,” she means if one of us gets hurt.

We’re doing everything in our power to limit that possibility, but when you’re in our line of work, there’s never a zero percent chance of you dying. It’s the reality we’ve each accepted over and over, but it’s different now we have something to come home to, someone who loves us.

Dropping a kiss to the top of her head, I savor the feel of her in my arms for long moments before finally letting her go and eyeing the three fuckers by the front door.

“You’re all on my shit list for making decisions without me.”

Damon shrugs. “Like you can say no to Chloe when she asks you for something.”

I don’t argue, because the proof is in the pudding, considering I was vehemently against her coming and I immediately relented when she looked up at me through sad green eyes.

“Let’s get this show on the road. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can retire and become a stay-at-home husband.”

I stride out the front door before they can argue about which of us she’s going to legally marry. A piece of paper doesn’t mean shit to me as long as she wears my ring, so they can fight that out between themselves.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

# CHLOE

NOW

Nerves roll through my belly, leaving a wave of nausea in its path.

I've never particularly enjoyed flying, especially on private jets. Something about their size has always made me anxious, but turbulence is the least of my worries right now.

The plan is simple, and I know the guys have gone over it a million times, but there are so many variables we can't prepare for, and that's what makes me nervous.

Camilla and her guys are meeting us in Jacksonville, but as excited as I am to see her, it doesn't overshadow how terrified I am that I'm going to lose someone today.

I can't shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong, and I learned a long time ago to trust my gut because it's usually right.

Maybe it's because everything about this was too easy.

Corbin intercepting the meeting request.

The location on neutral territory.

Even how casual the Lombardis have been since we registered the flight path under Damon's full name.

They know at least one of us is coming, and yet they haven't made a single move that would indicate that.

“You need to relax, Mama,” Kingston croons. “You’re making us all anxious.”

I glance up into his deep brown eyes, allowing the calm in them to settle my raging emotions. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“I know.” He nods. “I feel it too. But we’ve done everything we can to prepare. We have multiple teams in place to mitigate the risk, and although we would love to be able to remove it altogether, that’s not the reality of this kind of job.”

“I just want this to be okay. I want us to be safe.”

“We will be, and then we can get started on building a life that suits all of us.”

My chest tightens at his words. I’ve been thinking so much these past few days about what I want for the future. I’m still not sure I can put my body through pregnancy. Not because I don’t want to, but because the trauma I have from losing my first baby is just as strong today as it was ten years ago. I don’t think I would survive another loss.

But the idea of having a family has been calling to me.

Not anytime soon, and maybe we’ll decide as a collective that it’s not a path we want to walk, but I’m open to it.

Ryker drops down into the seat across from us, his golden eyes moving over me as if I may have suddenly hurt myself in the twenty minutes since he stepped away to help Corbin with something I definitely don’t understand. “You look stressed.”

I huff out a laugh. “Nothing gets past you.”

“You have no reason to worry, Chloe. We’ve got this. And the next time we’re on this jet, it will all be over.”

I want to argue with him. I want to tell him he doesn’t know that for sure. But arguing with Ryker is a lot like arguing with a brick wall.

King drops a kiss to the top of my head as the pilot announces we’ll be landing in the next twenty minutes.

“I think you should all go,” I say quietly. “I know you’re planning to have Ronan stay with me, but I think it’s the wrong move.”

There’s a beat of silence and I hold my breath, expecting them to shoot down the idea immediately. “What makes you say that?”

“I would feel better if you guys had all the backup you can, and contrary to popular belief, I can take care of myself. I have hand-to-hand combat

training, and I know how to shoot a gun. I don’t need anyone to babysit me.”

Ryker scowls, looking to Kingston to let me down gently.

“Let me talk it over with the others. I’m not comfortable leaving you completely unprotected, although I know you can handle yourself, but I think having Ronan with us could make Salvatore slip up.”

“Boss—”

He holds up a hand to Ryker. “Like I said, we’ll discuss it.”

The cabin attendant lets us know we need to fasten our seatbelts before Ryker can argue further, and I sigh at the well-timed reprieve.

As terrified as I am that something is going to go wrong, I’m so fucking ready for this to be over.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

# DAMON

NOW

I'm not exactly thrilled about being the bait for my father and Mikayla, but I understand it.

They need me to link the families, and without me or Ronan, their partnership is fragile at best.

That's the thing about arranged marriages that most people don't understand. No deal is as strong as when there's family involved. A signature on a dotted line doesn't mean shit compared to the strength of a mafia marriage, regardless of whether the participants go into it willingly or not.

It was drilled into me over and over as a kid that my duty to my bloodline included marrying Mikayla and ensuring the future generations could flourish from that agreement.

It doesn't help that Kingston changed the plan at the last minute.

He has Enzo and Corbin meeting us at the airfield and going with Chloe to the safety deposit box her father left for her while Salvatore and his men are distracted.

I agreed to this shitty plan because Ronan would be with her, and I know there's nothing my brother won't do to keep our girl safe, but leaving her with two people I don't know very well has me wanting to call time on this entire plan.

I will not have Chloe getting hurt because we were making rash decisions.

“This is our only chance to get her to the facility, and it could be what we need to burn the Lombardi empire to the ground,” Kingston argues.

He and Ryker have been at it for the last ten minutes, and I hate to admit I’m on the bodyguard’s side on this one.

Who would have thought we would ever agree on anything?

Growth or whatever.

“I don’t give a shit,” he snaps. “It was one thing for all four of us going to the meet and leaving her somewhere safe that we’ve staked out. It’s an entirely different thing to let her fly to another goddamn city without any of us!”

“Guys,” Chloe tries to interject, but Ronan tugs her back against him, murmuring something against her ear that makes her nod slowly.

He’s always been good at calming her down, and I’ve never been more grateful for that than I am right now.

“Isn’t the whole reason she’s here at all because she wanted to be nearby if something happens?” I ask, interjecting myself for the first time since they started bickering.

Kingston sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s why they’re leaving straight away. They’ll be back well and truly before the meet.”

“Then one of us can go with her,” Ryker says.

“No. We need to set things in place to mitigate as much risk as possible. You know this. This is how we do things, how we’ve *always* done things.”

“That was before!”

“Changing how we do things now could get us killed, Ryker. Don’t tell me you don’t know that because I know you do. You’re not a fucking idiot, so don’t act like one.”

“King!” Chloe admonishes.

He turns on her, his eyes softening as soon as he sees the fear on her features. “I’m sorry.” He sighs. “But this is the plan, and I won’t accept arguments about it. I know you’re all scared to let Chloe out of your sight. I am as well, but I wouldn’t send her with Corbin and Enzo if I didn’t trust them implicitly. They will keep her safe while we get things into position at the warehouse, and they’ll be back before Salvatore and Mikayla arrive.”

Ryker looks just as pissed as I do, but before we can argue our point further, Chloe steps forward and reaches out to each of us. Like moths to a

fucking flame, we both take her hand, and she looks between us with so much affection that I'll never be worthy of.

"This is the best play. I promise I'll keep myself safe, and I'll be back before you even get a chance to notice I'm gone. Plus, this will keep my mind busy instead of worrying about you constantly."

Ryker mutters something I can't hear but wraps his arms around her, holding her so tight against him I'm surprised she can breathe. He glances up at me and nods. "Come on, Lombardi. Get in here."

The part of me that normally revolts the second he orders I do something is noticeably missing, and I don't hesitate to wrap my arms around the both of them.

I guess this whole sharing thing isn't so bad after all.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

# CHLOE

NOW

Saying goodbye to the guys was harder than I would like to admit.

If there's one thing the last ten years has given me, it's independence.

I spent so much time alone, knowing the only person I could truly depend on was myself, and the way my chest has ached since the jet took off and left them behind in Jacksonville is almost an insult to that version of myself.

But it's normal to evolve. It's healthy to grow, even when it means leaving an older version of myself behind.

Corbin is exactly what I imagined from the few times we've spoken. Brown curly hair and glasses resting on the bridge of his nose as he types away on his laptop. He's by no means small, but beside Enzo anyone would look tiny. He's at least six foot seven, and he looks like he could take someone's head off just by looking at them funny.

I see now why Kingston was so confident to leave me in their very capable care, even if Ryker struggled to accept it.

Knowing they were at odds with one another when we left makes my stomach roll uncomfortably, but I have to accept that we're not always going to agree on everything.

There will be times when the five of us aren't able to come to common ground, and that includes when we're in a high-stress situation like this one.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I ask.

Corbin's soft brown eyes meet mine, his fingers pausing on the keyboard. "I don't think so. Everything's set up at the warehouse, and De Marco and the Legion have just arrived to ensure we haven't missed anything. I was just checking to make sure our firewalls are strong enough that no one can override them."

Enzo huffs out a laugh from the other side of the aisle where he's flicking a knife into the air and catching it between his fingers. He's been doing it ever since we took off, and it's as unsettling as it is mesmerizing. I'd rather not watch him cut a finger off, but it's really fucking hard to take my eyes off it. "Cor, you've checked the firewalls six times already today. Everything is in place. You need to relax."

"This helps to relax me, you know that," he scolds.

I only briefly met Remy and Rocco, but I'm fascinated by the dynamic the four of them have. They seem to bicker more than they do anything else, and yet it's obvious they wouldn't hesitate to take a bullet for one another.

"Do you think Lombardi has anyone inside the safety deposit facility?" I ask.

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Corbin frowns. "We don't believe so. We've been over every employee's file and have checked their accounts for out-of-the-ordinary payments. Nothing stuck out to us, but there's always a chance."

"We'll keep you safe, darlin'," Enzo assures me. "Wouldn't live to tell the tale if we let something happen to the boss's girl."

"I'd be more worried about Ryker." I half laugh.

He scoffs. "Ryker might be a lethal motherfucker, but he learned everything he knows from King. I've been on his bad side, and it was scary as shit."

“You don’t strike me as someone that’s afraid of much of anything.”

“Exactly.” He chuckles.

“How did you come to work for King?” I ask.

“It’s a long story,” Corbin tells me. “But the short version is that we were trained by The Hunter to take his place wiping out the shit stains that walk among us, and after a couple of years of managing contracts ourselves, we met him on a job. The client hired two teams, wanting to make sure the job was done properly, and we kind of clicked. Our skill sets filled gaps he had in his organization, and we got to stop negotiating our own contracts.”

“Which is a damn good thing because we were shit at it,” Enzo adds as he catches the knife and moves to spinning it on the table in front of him.

“And you like working for him?”

Corbin nods with a soft smile. “He’s a great boss, pays us too well for the work we would do for free. But he takes care of us. Makes sure we take time off after a heavy case and is always around if we need him.”

I smile at that, my chest warming at the thought of Kingston dropping everything to chat with one of his men.

“We’re commencing our descent, we’ll be on the ground in fifteen minutes,” the pilot says over the PA system, and my stomach rolls.

Our part of this plan should be easy, but no matter how hard I try, I still can’t shake the feeling that something’s going to go wrong.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

# CHLOE

### THEN
### TEN YEARS AGO

Kingston's been off today.

No less caring and affectionate than he has been the last three weeks, but there's something I haven't been able to shake since I woke up this morning.

A feeling of dread that just won't quit, no matter how hard I try to convince myself it's nothing.

It's the same one I had when I said goodbye to Ronan the day his father locked me and my family in the cellar. A constant presence that won't budge.

I've been feeling better the last few days. Stronger. More stable emotionally, but my therapist said that's perfectly normal and made sure to warn me that healing from this kind of trauma wouldn't be linear.

It's a journey and one I'm desperately trying to want to be on.

There's still the voice in the back of my mind that wants to give up, that doesn't see a point in living when I've lost everything. But I'm desperate to make my parents proud, to keep putting one foot in front of the other even when it hurts like hell.

It doesn't help that my hormones have been wreaking havoc on me, which again, is apparently normal.

Being a woman is really shitty sometimes.

I glance over at Kingston and frown. Today's the first day that he's worked in front of me. Every other day he's only gone into his office or moved to the desk in the corner of the bedroom when I was asleep.

Maybe that's what's throwing me off. Maybe it's just the change in our routine that has my anxiety ramping up.

We haven't spoken much about what comes next, but in the weeks I've been here, we've formed a bond that I like to think is unbreakable, and I would like to stay here, with him.

I'm not ready to move on when my heart still very much beats for Ronan, and I'm all too aware of how big our age gap is, but I can't lie and say I'm not attracted to him, so maybe down the track we could be…more.

I had dinner alone for the first time since he brought me here, and now I'm curled up with my book, trying to focus on the words on the page, but all I can think about is the sinking feeling in my belly.

I should just talk to Kingston about it, if for no other reason than to ease my own anxiety enough to sleep, but I don't want to bother him while he's working.

I've already taken him away from his work enough the past few weeks and it's time he gets back to what he loves, even if that means spending less time with me.

Glancing over at the bedside table, I reach for the sleeping pills my doctor prescribed me and take one before I can think twice about it.

I have an irrational fear about getting trapped in a nightmare and not being able to escape because of the medication in my system, but it hasn't happened so far and if I try to sleep without it, I'll just lie here and spiral until morning.

It's better that I get some sleep, and I know there's no shame in taking the medication that the doctor gave me for this very reason.

Light streams through the open curtains the same way it does every morning, and I force my groggy eyes open.

The worst part about taking the meds is how long it takes to wake up after having them, but it's worth it to let my body and mind get the rest they need.

I blink a few times, allowing the familiar room to come into focus but frown when Kingston is nowhere to be seen.

After realizing the mornings are the hardest time for me, he's made sure to always be around when I open my eyes each day, but maybe that's another part of our change in routine.

Pushing up, I look for any sign of the man that has held my hand through the worst times in my life but come up empty.

Maybe he's in the kitchen.

I roll out of bed and move into the bathroom, quickly splashing water on my face to wake myself up and brushing my teeth before padding through the penthouse.

It's far larger than I thought it would be, but if there's anything I've learned about Kingston since I arrived, it's that he's made a good life for himself since he left the Lombardis.

I pause when I find the kitchen empty, my brows dipping in confusion. As big as this place is, there aren't that many places he could be.

Deciding he must be in his office, I head across the apartment but come up short when I notice the bag on the table along with an assortment of documents.

Maybe he's going on a trip.

I change course and glance at the documents. He wouldn't have left them out if he was worried about me seeing them.

Picking up the passport and driver's license, my chest tightens when I find my face staring back at me.

He got me a new ID.

I guess that makes sense. I can't hide out here forever.

I place them down and pick up the documents, flicking through them to figure out what they are, but it's the moment I realize it's a travel itinerary and tickets that makes my stomach knot.

Because it's only my name on them.

The only things left on the table are an envelope and a folded piece of paper, and I reach for the latter first as my mind screams at me that it was right.

That feeling I had yesterday has never been wrong.

I unfold the piece of paper, my heart beating erratically as my blurring eyes move over the note, each word pushing me closer to the breakdown I thought I'd been able to avoid.

*hloe,*

*A friend of mine has a daughter who has recently lost her mother and needs someone to help her heal.*

*I thought you could help one another through this hard time.*

*There's enough cash to get you through until John De Marco starts paying you, and board is included in your generous remuneration.*

*I'm sorry I couldn't stay to take you to the airport yourself, but a car will be waiting for you two hours before your flight time to make sure you get to the airport in time.*

*All the best,*

*Kingston*

A violent sob tears from my chest as my knees buckle beneath me, but I barely register the pain of my knees hitting the tiles.

Because the physical pain could never compare to how many times my poor beaten heart has been torn apart in just a few weeks.

I make two promises to myself as I pull my knees to my chest. I'll never allow anyone close enough to hurt me like this again, and I'll never ignore my gut when it tries to tell me something's not right.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

# RONAN

NOW

I check the location on the phone we gave Chloe for what feels like the hundredth time since we watched their jet take off an hour ago.

They'll be in and out of Miami in under an hour, and then they'll be on their way back to us. But that does little to ease the anxiety racketing in my chest.

Splitting up seemed like the right call when King floated the idea, but now that I'm living it, I'm not so sure.

Trusting two men I don't know very well with my reason for breathing is overshadowing the knowledge that I'll be face-to-face with my father for the first time since I escaped with Chloe.

Once Salvatore is dead and his operation has been dismantled, we're going to go to the compound one last time to pick up the things that meant a lot to our mom. She would want Chloe to have her engagement ring and whatever other sentimental jewelry she accumulated over the years, and Damon admitted he squirreled away some keepsakes from the Weavers just in case Chloe came looking for them.

And then we'll burn the place to the ground.

There's a part of me that's sad that the place where all the best things in my life happened will be turned to ash, but the ghosts within those walls

will never be exorcised, and there's a satisfaction in burning down everything our father holds dear.

He deserves to rest in hell, knowing his life was meaningless.

We haven't decided where we're going to make our home base once this is all done, but our girl loves the house in Maine and we've settled in there without any issues. There's space for the army of animals she and Ryker are always talking about, and it will be nice to live somewhere without walls.

The compound was always a prison, even when they told me it was for our safety, and although we'll always be surrounded by security, the expanse of the ocean will never feel like the wall around the compound did.

"You're as bad as my guys." Camilla rolls her eyes, but there's an adoring smile on her face.

As if to prove her point, Kaos sidles up beside her, wrapping an arm around her waist, and she doesn't hesitate to lean into him.

"I'll feel better once she's back on the ground in Jacksonville," I admit.

Kaos nods in understanding. What they went through when Camilla and Crew were missing is still weighing on them heavily, but she doesn't seem to mind their overprotective instincts.

"Are they in Miami now?" she asks.

"They're making their way to the facility."

"I know your instincts are screaming at you to shield her from the world, but I've sparred with Chloe a lot over the years, and I promise she's not a damsel in distress. The things you taught her when you were young stuck. And her shooting skills have always been strong. Even if she's a little rusty, she'll be able to protect herself."

Her words are comforting, even if she's not telling me anything I didn't already know.

Damon steps up beside me and glances down at my phone with a smirk. "I thought I was the only one."

"All four of you are watching her like a hawk," Kaos informs us, and I look up to see Ryker watching his screen intently as he drills a discreet camera in the corner while Kingston has his phone propped up against his laptop screen, looking between the two devices every few seconds.

"This was a bad idea," Damon says.

"This was the best option. We need whatever is in that lockbox, and this is the only time she'll be able to slip into the city and out again without Lombardi's attention," I assure him.

“One of us should be with her.”

“But we all need to be here. I know you’re worried, I’m worried too. But in a few hours this will be over and we can move on with our lives.”

His eyes glance back down at the screen again and then he stalks off without another word.

“God, I thought I was stubborn,” Kaos chuckles.

“You are stubborn,” Camilla sasses.

“Watch it, Princess.”

“Or what?”

Deciding I don’t want to hear any more, I step away and head over to see if I can help Ryker with the cameras.

If I can just keep myself busy until she’s back on the jet, I’ll be able to stop watching the tracker like a hawk.

Or at least I hope I can.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

# CHLOE

NOW

It's been a long fucking time since I've been into Miami, but I enjoy the sun on my skin while I can. By the time we get back to Maine, it will be freezing, and although I favor the cold weather, I'm not going to waste an opportunity to enjoy the Florida sun.

Enzo parked a few blocks away from the facility, deciding we were better going the rest of the way on foot to avoid suspicion.

Then he shoved a baseball cap and a pair of dark glasses on me as if it's going to do anything to stop someone from recognizing me.

But this is their forte, and I'm just along for the ride, so I don't bother arguing.

I just want to get this over with so we can get back to my guys.

Corbin walks beside me with his arm around my shoulders, his own hat pulled low as he guides me through the streets, while Enzo walks behind us, keeping his distance to analyze any potential threats.

Despite the ongoing anxiety in my belly, I feel safe with these men, and I truly believe they're going to do everything they can to keep me safe.

The problem is what's outside of their control.

That's what worries me.

We round the corner to a street that seems vaguely familiar, but nothing jumps out to me as a landmark I recognize.

Maybe we just drove past this place when I was young.

“Lean into Corbin and laugh.” Enzo’s voice comes through the earpiece, and I do as I’m told without hesitation.

He buries his face in my hair, and I don’t miss the tension rolling through him. Ryker mentioned he doesn’t like to be touched, and I’ve done my best to respect those boundaries. As soon as we get the all clear, I’ll put some distance between us again.

“There’s a car down the street, blacked-out SUV with no plates.”

“Are they onto us?” Corbin asks, his cheek still resting on top of my head.

“I don’t think so. When we get inside, they’ll only let you back into the vault. Grab whatever is in the box, shove it in your backpack and get the fuck out of there. Okay?”

“Got it,” I reply, even though we’ve been over the plan five times since we left the airfield.

The door to the nondescript building comes into view, and Corbin guides me inside, leaving Enzo leaning against the wall a few yards away with a lit cigarette between his fingers.

I step forward with a fake smile plastered across my lips, forcing every bit of composure to the surface. “Hi there, I have a lockbox that my father left for me. I’d love to access it and close the account if possible.”

The woman behind the desk sweeps her eyes over my all-black outfit but doesn’t comment. “Do you have the key?”

“I do. I also have my ID and the will here if you need to see it.” I pull the paperwork out of the small crossbody bag with trembling fingers. “I only recently found out that my father passed despite it being so long ago.” I force my voice to wobble in the hope it will explain away my nerves.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she replies, but no emotion crosses her face, and that only has my anxiety screaming at me to get the fuck out of here.

She looks over the documents before pushing them back across the desk at me. “We’ll need to check your fingerprints and retina once we’re inside the vault.”

I nod my understanding as her gaze moves to Corbin, who still has his arm around me.

“Only you will have access.”

“That’s okay, my boyfriend is happy to wait out here. I won’t be long.”

Without another word she steps around the counter and gestures for me to follow her down a long hallway.

“Be careful. You’ll lose connection with us when you’re in the vault, but don’t panic. I’ll be watching the cameras inside just in case.”

I nod and step out of his comforting hold.

Following her down the hallway, I notice the black pumps she’s wearing and frown. Those are Louboutins. Not an uncommon shoe by any means, but they’re expensive as hell.

I bite down on my bottom lip and drag my eyes up to the way her long blonde hair swishes from side to side. Occasionally she glances back at me with annoyance, and when she looks over her shoulder as we approach the doors, I notice her diamond earrings and the matching necklace so like the ones Ronan gifted me on my sixteenth birthday. The same ones I never wore because I was terrified to wear something that cost so much outside of the house.

Isolated, the jewelry and the shoes wouldn’t have the hair on the back of my neck standing on end, but I can’t shake the feeling that something’s not right with her.

“You checked her background?” I murmur so softly she can’t hear, but I’m hoping Corbin can.

“She came back squeaky clean,” he confirms. “Do you have a bad vibe?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’re safe,” he assures me.

I swallow heavily and step up beside her, waiting for further instructions.

“Place your right hand here.” She points to the panel before gesturing to a small camera above it. “And look into the retina scanner. They scan at the same time.”

I follow her instructions, doing my best to keep my breathing under control because the last thing I want to do is alert her to the fact I know something isn’t right here.

The panel lights up beneath my palm, and after a few seconds, something clicks and the door unlatches.

When Kingston mentioned that this existed, I had no idea how that was possible because I couldn’t remember ever coming here to do the security checks, but now I’m inside, and it does seem vaguely familiar.

She opens the heavy door and gestures for me to go ahead, and against my better judgment, I step into the vault with a lump in my throat.

I'm about to lose my connection with Corbin and Enzo, and I'm confident I'm going to be locked in a confined space with someone who wishes me harm, I'm not sure any other response than anxiety would fit the moment.

We step through a metal detector, and my shoulders relax when it doesn't light up like a Christmas tree.

I guess the gun Corbin handed me in the car really does go undetected in these things.

Having a way to protect myself if things go wrong is offering me a degree of comfort I didn't realize I needed.

Her lips purse, as if she was expecting the alarms to sound, and then she has no choice but to unlock the gate to our left.

I reach for the weapon I have stashed in the back of my cargo pants as she guides me to the far wall and points to the box with the same number as what was on the documents from Dad's lawyer.

"I'll give you a minute," she says and turns on her sky-high heels before I can respond.

Dragging in an unsteady breath and slipping the key into the lockbox, a soft sigh of relief slips out when it turns.

There was a small part of me that was convinced it wouldn't work, that this was a wild goose chase that Salvatore had planted for me.

I look over my shoulder, and once I've confirmed she's out of sight, I release my hold on the gun and use both hands to tug the box out.

Carrying it to the large metal table in the middle of the room, my brow furrows as my mind tries to process what I'm seeing.

There's a lot of cash and my mother's wedding and engagement rings, but it's the files that have my attention.

Phone numbers and coordinates, evidence that any law enforcement officer worth their job would lose their shit to find.

My father didn't just leave me a safety net. He left me the gasoline and match to burn the entire operation to the ground.

Before I can think about what I've found any more, I kick myself into gear, shoving the contents into the backpack as quickly as I can before clicking the locks into place.

When Corbin told me the bag is basically a safe that you can wear on your back, I thought he was bullshitting me, but the only key to this thing is on the jet waiting for us.

I turn, slipping my arms through the straps and start toward the door I came through only to come face-to-face with the barrel of a gun.

“Give me the bag,” she says evenly, her grip on the weapon absolute. This isn’t her first time holding someone at gunpoint, which is as reassuring as it is concerning.

“You have to know I can’t do that.”

“Just give me the fucking bag, and you and your friends will be free to go.”

I glance up at the camera in the corner, hoping that Corbin is seeing this right now, but on the chance that he’s not, I bring my hands out in front of me.

As much as I would like to reach for my own weapon, it will take me too long, and I’ll probably get myself shot in the process.

“What did they give you?”

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

“So you hold your clients at gunpoint on a daily basis?”

She huffs out an irritated sigh. “I don’t have time for this. Just give me the goddamn bag or I’ll shoot you.”

I shrug. “You could do that, but you’ll spend the rest of your life on the run from some of the most lethal men on earth, and you’ll never be able to get into the contents.”

“I don’t give a fuck. I’ll be long gone before they ever know I exist, and my job ends as soon as I hand the bag over. Getting into it isn’t my problem.”

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I drag in an unsteady breath. “Okay.” I nod slowly. “I’ll give you the bag.”

Confusion flashes through her eyes, but I don’t wait for her to give me the go-ahead before moving as if I’m slipping my arm from the strap.

My fingers wrap around the gun, and I try to keep my movements fluid, so I don’t raise suspicion.

By the time my arm slips from the strap, there’s a look of triumph across her smug features, and I can’t help but smile a little as I train my own gun on her.

But I don’t hesitate.

There’s no way I get out of this vault alive while she’s still standing.

I pull the trigger without warning and slip the handle back over my arm as I step forward.

She thrashes in pain, her hand clutching the shoulder I shot as she curses and cries.

“Should have checked me for weapons.” I smirk and kick her gun away. “I’ll call you an ambulance once we’re out of the city.”

I press the green button to release the locks and slip out of the vault as I tuck my weapon back into the waistband of my pants.

“You got it?” Corbin asks.

I nod. “We need to get out of here before her backup arrives.”

But as if my words have summoned them, three black SUVs come to a screeching halt out the front.

Enzo bursts through the doors and shoves us toward the back. “Time to go!”

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

# CHLOE

NOW

By some miracle, there's no one waiting for us in the back alley, and Enzo shoves me in the opposite direction to the car.

"You okay to run, darlin'?"

"I don't think I have much choice right now." I half laugh, but the panic raging through my chest overshadows any humor.

Corbin takes my hand, and we sprint toward the mouth of the alley, our heavy footsteps and panting breaths fill my ears alongside my racing heartbeat.

Maybe Damon and Ryker were right.

Maybe I shouldn't have come here on my own.

I trust Corbin and Enzo to keep me safe, but it's different than having one of my guys here.

Enzo throws an arm out as we reach the end, and I grind to a halt while he checks the street before ushering us to run in front of him.

I used to keep myself in really good shape, but the last month has been…taxing to say the least, and I haven't been on the treadmill since I left the De Marco estate.

If I make it out of this alive, I'm reinstating daily training if for no other reason than to never feel like my chest is going to cave in from panting so hard.

“We have company,” Enzo shouts, making Corbin curse as he drags me further up the street.

Suddenly the Florida sun is a problem I’d rather not be dealing with.

“What do we do?” I pant, trying not to let the fear seep into my voice but it’s pointless.

I’m fucking terrified, and pretending I’m not isn’t going to help matters.

“We just need to break off from them long enough to get in a taxi. There’s so many in the city that it will be easy to lose them, but we need a minute or two head start so we don’t lead them straight to the airfield.”

“Something tells me that’s going to be easier said than done.”

“Turn left up here,” Enzo calls out, and we don’t hesitate to do as he says.

This alley is tighter than the first one, and there’s a car already parked halfway down. With any hope we’ll lose the cars that are tailing us, leaving us with whoever is on foot.

We barely make it past the car before Corbin tugs me behind a dumpster so hard my shoulder screams in protest, but the sound of gunshots eats up my complaints immediately.

Corbin peeks around the edge, his own gun produced from God knows where as he pops off a couple of shots before ducking back around.

“You okay?”

I nod, my breaths sawing in and out of my chest.

“Once Enzo gives us the all-clear, we’re going to make a run for the end of the alley. You and me are going to jump into a taxi while he holds them off, and then he’ll meet us.”

“We can’t leave him!”

His eyes soften. “Enzo is the most capable motherfucker I’ve ever met. I promise he thrives on this shit, but we need to get you out of here.”

Worrying my bottom lip between my teeth, I try to find another argument, but they promised they would keep me safe at all costs, and I guess this is part of that.

“Go now!”

I barely get the chance to process his words before Corbin has us sprinting the rest of the way down the alley with my heart in my throat the entire time.

His hand shoots up as a taxi approaches the curb, and I barely get a chance to open the door before I’m ushered inside with Corbin coming in

after me.

The driver gives us a curious look but the car behind him beeps, distracting him from the fact that two people who are clearly running for their lives just got in the back.

“Where to?”

Corbin rattles off an address that definitely isn’t the airfield, but I don’t question him. I’m too grateful to still be breathing to do anything other than lean my head back and desperately try to calm my racing heart.

The sooner we get back on that jet and I’m on my way back to my guys, the better.

I’m not sure how long we drive for, but Corbin spends the whole time with his head buried in his phone, typing so quickly I can barely track his thumbs as they move over the screen.

I spend half my time thanking the powers that be that I’m still alive, and the other half looking through the back window as if I’ll be able to identify if we’re being followed.

I’m way too heightened to think clearly, let alone rationally figure out if someone is tailing us.

“Is Enzo okay?” I finally ask, dragging Corbin’s attention from his phone for the first time since we pulled away from the curb.

“He’s fine. He’s on his way to the meeting point as well and should get there a few minutes after us. We had a backup car stashed there just in case something like this happened,” he explains.

“Smart. That’s smart.” I nod, allowing the breath I’ve been holding to release from my burning lungs.

He smirks. “This isn’t our first rodeo.”

“Thank God for that.” I glance out the back window again. “Have you let the guys know we’re running late?”

“Ryker has been blowing up my phone since the second we took the back exit instead of going out the front. But I’ve let them know what’s happening and have assured them three hundred times that you’re unscathed.”

“They won’t believe you until they see for themselves.”

“That’s what I figure.” He chuckles. “I didn’t think he had it in him, to be honest. We used to be two peas in a pod when it came to that. Not forming attachments with people outside our circles. Not feeling emotions

the way other people do. But I guess there's hope for me yet." He half laughs, but there's a sadness in the sound that makes my heart hurt for him.

Everyone deserves love, and I hope like hell that there's someone out there for him, because despite only knowing him for a short time, I know there's nothing he won't do for those he cares about.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

# KINGSTON

NOW

Setting traps has always been a hobby of mine. I'm sure you're thinking that anything linked to my work can't be considered a hobby, but I assure you, shit like this is the most fun I can ever remember having, even when the stakes are this high.

It's been almost twenty years since I've been face-to-face with Salvatore Lombardi, and the anticipation is making me antsy.

That feeling isn't helped by the fact Chloe is held up in Miami.

The guys have assured me she's safe, and there's nothing I can do from here other than make sure we're ready. But it's rattled the others.

Ryker is pacing around like he's about to lose his shit and murder everyone in sight, and Damon is watching the tracker on her phone like doing so will miraculously bring her back to us.

Surprisingly, it's Ronan who has been able to keep on task throughout, even if his phone is always open with her location.

But I suppose out of all of us, he has the healthiest relationship with Chloe and has learned to compartmentalize things that the rest of us are still working through.

Crew stops beside me, his mismatched eyes moving over the warehouse cataloging what we have left to do, but there isn't much. We've made far

better time than we thought we would, even with two of our guys glued to their phone like their lives depended on their eyes remaining on the screen.

“You doing okay?” he asks.

The false placation is on my lips, but I shake it off. If there’s anyone in this building that understands what’s at stake here, it’s him. He knows what it’s like to wait your entire life to find your soulmate and then they find themselves in life-threatening situations that could have you losing them at any second.

“Not really.” I half laugh. “But I have to keep it together for the others.”

He smiles as he watches Camilla and Bishop help Ronan with the microphones we’re planting around the warehouse to catch every word said.

We want to make sure we have every bit of ammunition we can to take them down if by some miracle they leave here alive.

“Things will get better,” he assures me. “The early days of a relationship like ours can be hard. Instead of just two people’s emotions being considered, there are five, and that’s a lot to contend with. But the more settled you get, the easier it is to compromise for one another.”

I sigh. “Things have fallen into place a lot smoother than I expected. The fact Damon and Ryker couldn’t last an hour without threatening each other’s lives a few weeks ago and now they’re working together like they’ve been doing it their whole lives is a testament to that. But we have a long way to go.”

“You’ll get there, and then you’ll forget you ever had a life where you weren’t all together.”

In the moments between planning and plotting, I’ve allowed my mind to wander to the future and what it might hold for the five of us, and the thing I’ve found in each one of those daydreams is the fact that I don’t care where we end up or what we fill our time with. All that matters is that we’re together with Chloe at the center of our universe.

Bishop frowns and looks our way. “Lombardi is on the move. Looks like they’re coming early.”

“Time to get this show on the road.” Crew claps his hands together and starts barking reminders of everyone’s positions, but I zone it out, instead moving to where Damon is leaning against a pile of pallets, watching the tracker.

“Are you going to be okay?”

He shakes his head. “I wanted her to be somewhere safe while I did this so my focus wouldn’t be split.”

“I know, and I’m sorry we changed the plan at the last minute, but the guys will get her back here, and by the time this is over, she’ll be safe and sound.”

“That doesn’t fill me with as much comfort as you think it does.”

I scoff. “It wasn’t supposed to, but you need to get your head in the game. I know it’s hard. I know you’re scared for our girl, but the most important thing for you to do right now is make it out of this alive so we can go home to her.”

“I’ve got this.” He sucks in a breath and takes one last look at his phone before tucking it into his pocket.

Patting his shoulder, I take a look around before taking the metal steps up to the second level, where me and Ronan will be watching from the office.

Ryker and the Syndicate of the Legion will be a block away with the rest of our men until everyone arrives, and then they’ll move in and take out any guards our guests leave outside.

And Damon will be standing in the middle of the warehouse, ready to go toe-to-toe with the man that’s caused him nothing but pain his whole life.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

# DAMON

NOW

It's harder than I would like to slip the mask of indifference I spent my life mastering into place. It was the barrier I kept between me and the rest of the world to keep myself safe, but at some point that shield became my biggest weakness, and it only took almost losing the love of my life to realize that.

None of this shit matters.

Power and infamy and money don't mean shit if you have no one to share it with.

The legacy I spent my whole life living up to will fall tonight, and with it, all those expectations, all the sins, it all dies right alongside it.

My earpiece crackles, reminding me that I'm not facing this alone, even if I am the only one standing down here waiting to be surrounded by our enemies.

It wasn't that long ago that I was the one on the other side. I was the one going up against anyone who dared to cross the Lombardis. It was all a part of my transition into becoming the boss and there was nothing I wouldn't do to take that role from my father.

But it's funny how quickly everything changes.

"Chloe and the guys are in the air. Once they land, they'll head here to meet us," Kingston says into the earpiece, and my entire body relaxes from

just a few words.

A more muffled voice comes through, and my chest tightens. “I’m safe and sound, D. Now make sure you come back to me the same way. I love you.”

I’m starting to think that repressing my feelings for Chloe all those years has made my love for her so much more intense, but then again, she’s the only person I’ve ever allowed myself to love so maybe this is normal.

“I love you too, Duchess. You get your ass back to Jacksonville.” The words are too loud for the quiet warehouse, but I don’t give a fuck. If this goes sideways, I want to make sure I didn’t leave anything unsaid.

The earpiece goes silent, and I drag in a steady breath at the sound of car doors slamming.

I’ve got this.

I’m not alone.

And when it’s done, I have the most beautiful woman in the world waiting for me to start our life together.

The doors in front of me swing open, and three of my father’s men fan out, their weapons settling on me as soon as they see I’m standing here.

Dad steps over the threshold next, and I curse Kingston for not letting me blow this place up.

At least Ryker liked my explosives idea…maybe there is some merit to their theory that the reason we butt heads so much is because we’re so alike.

Not that I’m ever going to admit that out loud.

“Ah, if it isn’t the prodigal son.”

“Salvatore,” I greet, keeping my shoulders relaxed and my hands wedged in my pockets.

“Where’s your good-for-nothing brother?”

“Probably with that whore that he could never get over,” Ricky sneers.

My mask slips ever so slightly, the insult on his lips making me want to give him the painful death he deserves.

“Don’t engage,” Kingston reminds me. “They’re trying to get a rise out of you. Mikayla is on the move. She’ll be here in a few.”

“He’s safe.”

“But she’s not, is she?” Salvatore smirks. “Last I heard she was being chased through the streets of Miami.”

I huff out a laugh. “Looks like your information is as old as you are.”

His cheeks turn the same shade of red they always did before he lost his temper, but this time he has nothing that can hurt me. Not when Chloe is safe in the air.

Maybe that is the safest place for her right now, even if I fucking hated the idea of her being anywhere other than nearby while this goes down.

“Oh, did your team not tell you they failed to apprehend her? I guess they probably didn’t mention that she has the contents of Neil’s lockbox.”

“Careful.” Kingston’s voice fills my ear. “You’re doing great, but don’t push him too far just yet.”

“He had nothing,” he spits as his grip on his gun tightens.

“If he had nothing, why have you spent so many years trying to get into that box? Why did you lie to me about why you wanted Chloe returned alive so badly?”

“Because it was none of your fucking business,” he snaps.

I nod slowly. “As the person who was meant to inherit everything, I think it was very much my business, but then again, it seems you never had any intention of ever giving me the throne.”

“You’re too weak to lead the Lombardi name.”

“No, you’re a control freak who never wanted to give up the power he lorded over everyone. But that power isn’t going to follow you into the afterlife.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, boy.”

“I’m not your boy. The only thing I am to you now is your fucking downfall.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTY

# DAMON

NOW

The doors on the other side of the warehouse swing open before he can spit out whatever comeback came to his mind, and I turn in time to see Mikayla step into the open space.

She's wearing a tight-fitting pantsuit with heels that defy gravity, but she glides forward like she's not in the least bit surprised to find me standing here.

"If it isn't my fiancé."

"Ex-fiancé," I amend.

Her eyes flare with annoyance as her team fans out behind her, surrounding the warehouse and therefore me. The number of guns trained on me right now should probably concern me, but there's nothing I can do about it other than wait for backup to arrive.

Mikayla glances at my father, tipping her head to him. "I can have an officiant here in twenty minutes if you're ready to tie our families together."

"I wouldn't bother," I say. "There won't be a Lombardi family to tie yourself to for much longer."

"What is he talking about?"

"Chloe's going through the files with Corbin now. We have foreign bank account statements, requests for hits, and a paper trail of documents alluding to the real reason behind your arranged marriage," Kingston tells

me. “The Vegas connection to the trafficking ring dates back decades, even before you boys were born and Salvatore wants a piece of the pie. According to this, he thought he could rise to the top of the operation so long as the families were connected by marriage.”

I suck in a breath, hoping they don’t notice the way my mask slips. Being a part of a crime family, you learn early on that good and bad aren’t as black and white as the world would have you believe. But there were always lines we wouldn’t cross, and I thought trafficking was one of them.

All those years I worked to take the throne, just for it to be sitting atop a pile of sins I knew nothing of.

Grasping for my composure, I take a breath and reply, “Looks like Neil had everything documented as an insurance policy. Text messages, bank statements, and your plans to rise to the top of a global trafficking ring by marrying your oldest son off for connections.”

His face falters ever so slightly before glancing at Mikayla as if she’ll be able to do anything to help him.

“And don’t worry, Mik. There’s plenty of incriminating evidence on your family as well.”

The color drains from her cheeks, and there’s a sense of triumph that I can’t shake. This feels too fucking good. All these years I’ve been forced to keep my mouth shut, to ignore the shitty things my father has been a part of while never being given the reason for anything, only the order.

But not anymore.

“You’re bluffing,” Salvatore growls, his finger tightening over the trigger of his gun.

I shrug. “Maybe I am. But are you willing to risk that?”

“The teams are surrounding the warehouse,” Kingston tells me. “You’re doing great, Damon. Just a little bit longer, and this is all over.”

Mikayla turns around to speak to one of her men in hushed whispers, allowing me to turn to my father.

As melodramatic as it may be, I have some shit I want to say to him before I put a bullet in his brain.

“I know you orchestrated Mom’s accident. I know you were the only one that hired someone to take her out because she was meeting with a divorce lawyer.”

His cheeks turn a deeper shade of pink as his loyal followers murmur between themselves, their eyes widening as I divulge some of his deepest

secrets.

“She wanted to get out of that godforsaken compound, and she would have taken Ronan and me with her, but you couldn’t let that happen, could you?”

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

“You couldn’t let her go. Did you know she would call Kingston to drive her to her appointment? Or were you banking on her taking her usual driver where you would have more control over the situation?”

“Shut up!” he shouts as his entire body begins to tremble with rage.

“Damon,” Kingston warns through the earpiece.

“She would be ashamed of you, *Dad*.” I spit the word. “She would be ashamed of the man you became and the ones you turned Ronan and me into.”

His eyes flare with fury, but I can’t stop. There’s so much I want to say, so fucking much I need to get off my chest before this motherfucker leaves this earth. “Shut the fuck up!” he screams.

“You want to know something? I obeyed almost every single order you gave me, even the ones that made my stomach churn, but there was one time I couldn’t do it. One time when you went too fucking far, and I couldn’t let you kill someone innocent.” A slow smile tips up the corners of my lips as his brow furrows, trying to anticipate what I’m going to say. “I was the one that helped Chloe escape the night you killed her parents. I knew I’d never be able to look my brother in the eye again if I let you kill the love of his life. And if I’m honest, I wouldn’t have been able to look at myself in the mirror after killing the only woman I could ever love.”

I’m breathing hard, my chest rising and falling so fast I know I’m at the end of my tether.

I’ve spent most of my life wanting to kill Salvatore Lombardi, but I was bound by loyalty, bound by a name and a legacy.

But after today those things won’t exist anymore.

Everything I thought I wanted will be burned to the fucking ground, right alongside the man I hate with every single beat of my heart.

“Damon.” Chloe’s voice fills my ear, and my chest tightens for a whole new reason. She’s safe. “We just landed, and we’re on our way to the warehouse.”

Thank fuck.

“As touching as this family reunion is,” Mikayla interjects, “none of this is relevant to me or my associates. It doesn’t matter what you think your little whore has because my employers are far too powerful to be taken down by the likes of you.”

“Aren’t you the least bit interested where your brother is?” I ask.

She sucks in a breath, but her face remains neutral. Mikayla was always a cold, heartless bitch, but somewhere over the last ten years, she’s lost her soul.

“He’s dead. I’m not sure what Kovu did with the body, but you can ask him when he gets here…if you don’t die first, obviously.”

That seems to get her attention, and she turns to who I assume is her head of security just as the doors burst open and the first shot is fired.

May she and my father rest in hell.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

# RYKER

NOW

There was a time in the not-so-distant past that I lived for this shit. I thrived on blood and chaos and gunfire, and I never thought that would change.

And don't get me wrong, I'm fucking hyped to be wiping out some of the world's scummiest humans, but there's a part of me, and not a small part at that, that just can't wait to get back to Chloe.

Knowing she's safe and on her way here has allowed each of us to refocus on the task at hand because we don't want her to live the rest of her life in danger.

We want to give her the world, and that includes one free from threats to her life. Meaning every person in this warehouse that didn't arrive with us needs to die.

I burst through the door and take aim at one of Salvatore's men, reveling in the way he hits the ground like a sack of potatoes before moving on to my next target.

Both Lombardi's and Mikayla's teams scramble to assess the situation they've found themselves in, and I'm a little smug that we tricked them both.

Much to my own dismay, I have to give Damon credit for distracting them while we set up.

He’s an asshole, but I guess he’s okay sometimes.

I catch sight of Kingston and Ronan on the second level providing cover as we fan out, trapping our targets in the center of the space.

If there’s one thing the boss does better than almost anyone else, it’s set a trap.

Damon ducks behind the pallet where he stashed his gear earlier, and I position myself in front of it, making sure no one can drop in while he’s vulnerable.

Chloe would be pissed if I let him get shot, especially seeing as the last bullet wound he had was from me.

He deserved it, though, and I stand by that.

Once he’s geared up, he rounds the stack of pallets and smirks at me. “Careful, bodyguard, I’m going to start thinking you like me if you keep this up.”

“I fucking hate you,” I growl and take off toward where Remy is engaged in hand-to-hand combat with one of Vega’s guys.

Seems I have some frustrations to work out, and these assholes look like the perfect punching bags.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

# RONAN

NOW

I keep an eye on my father as I pick off anyone that so much as thinks about raising a gun toward one of our guys.

Camilla and Kovu look like they're having the time of their lives in the back corner where three fully grown men are getting their asses beat, while the rest of their group are fanned out around the warehouse.

But dear old Dad is skirting the action as only he can.

He used to scream at us about being mission ready, but I can't remember the last time he was part of one, especially in any meaningful way.

That was mine and Damon's job while he stayed safe and sound at the compound.

God, he's an asshole.

"Salvatore's on the move," I say to Kingston beside me.

"Looks like he's heading for the back entrance," he replies, glancing around the huge space with a scowl.

We have a lot of men, more than I think I've ever had on my side in an operation like this, but it doesn't feel like enough to keep anyone from escaping.

"Head down and follow him. Don't let him get away," he orders, and I don't hesitate.

I take the metal steps two at a time as adrenaline rushes through every nerve in my body.

This ends here.

Salvatore slips through the door, not bothering to check if anyone is following him. I guess he's out of practice from all those missions he missed.

"You good?" Ryker asks as I pass him.

"Dad's making a run for it."

"Call out if you need backup."

I give him a quick nod and slip out the same way my father did.

The sky has turned a deep pink as the sun sinks below the horizon, and for a moment, all I want in the world is to be back at the house in Maine.

I think I knew the moment we stepped foot inside that it was our home, a fresh start for all of us, but we haven't discussed where we want our home base to be yet.

As long as we're together and far away from Miami, I couldn't give a shit where we live.

I find my father looking around urgently when he realizes the men he left outside are dead, and I can't help but chuckle.

This is far more satisfying than I thought it would be.

"Did you think we'd make your escape easy?" I call out as the door slams shut behind me, making him startle.

Spineless piece of shit.

He turns slowly, fear and anger warring in his eyes. "How could you betray me like this?"

"How could you force my pregnant eighteen-year-old girlfriend to watch you torture and kill her parents with every intention of killing her?" I ask as I step forward with my gun trained on him. "How could you lie to me for ten years about what happened that night? How could you blame Kingston for Mom's accident when it was you who ordered the hit? How could you get our family in bed with a fucking trafficking operation?"

There are a million shitty things he's done that I could demand answers on, but just these ones make my stomach roll.

"You don't know what you're talking about. They're lying to you!"

"The only person that has lied to me is you. You took everything good in our lives and crushed it. You made it impossible for us to have any

semblance of a life that wasn't lived for the Lombardi name. You took *everything* from us."

His panicked gaze darts around the quiet parking lot, looking for an escape that doesn't exist. We made sure of it.

"I was trying to make a better life for you boys."

"No, you weren't," I spit. "You were trying to make a better life for yourself and used us to do it."

Movement catches my attention out of the corner of my eye, and I can't help but smirk.

Chloe has her gun raised, her hand steady as she moves in from the other side of my father.

"I'd like to say it's nice to see you again but I think we both know that would be a lie," she says evenly.

Dad turns with his gun raised toward her, but that's when he notices Enzo by her side.

"You don't have to do this. Your father wouldn't want this for you."

A rough laugh tears from her, but the sadness in her eyes is evident. She never got closure, never got to properly say goodbye to the people that raised her. "My father would want me to put a bullet in your head for all the pain you've caused. My father wanted me to tear your operation to the fucking ground with all the evidence he compiled for me. But I think I'll settle for you burning in hell."

I'm endlessly proud of Chloe, but never more so than I am right now.

"It's over, Dad," I say calmly. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

If I'm honest, I don't actually mind how hard he makes this. Part of me wants to keep him alive long enough to make him watch us blow up the compound and everything he's worked for. Plus, I don't hate the idea of Ryker getting his knives out.

But all that matters is that he stops breathing and is no longer a threat to me or my family.

"I should have fucking killed you when I had the chance," he snarls. "You always were a little cunt, always distracting my boys when they should have been focused on the family. I knew if you two went off to college and got a taste of life together without the burden of responsibility hanging over you that you would never come back."

“You’re just digging yourself a deeper hole, old man,” I tell him. “Anything else you want to say before you die?”

He glares at me, and before I can get the shot off, Chloe’s finger squeezes the trigger, hitting him right between the eyes. His body remains upright for long seconds and then crumples to the ground, his gun skittering across the concrete.

I rush toward her, tugging her into my arms and reveling in the feel of her against me. “I’m so fucking proud of you, Sparrow.”

“I’m sorry I killed him. I should have let you do it,” she murmurs against my chest.

“No, he took everything from you. If there’s anyone that deserved to kill him, it was you.”

Her bottom lip wobbles, her body trembling as her adrenaline crashes. “I want to go home.”

“Me too, baby. Me too.” I sigh. “But there’s a couple more stops we have to make before we can head back to Maine.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

# CHLOE

NOW

Kingston wraps his arms around me from behind as we wait for the cleanup crew to finish with the bodies.

Even though I grew up in a crime family, this is the first time I've ever been present for this kind of thing, and it's as disturbing as it is fascinating. Not sure what that says about me.

"You doing okay, Mama?"

I nod, leaning my head back against his chest. "I'm ready to get back to Maine."

"You like the house?"

"I love it. It feels…" I hesitate for a moment. "It feels like home."

"Then that's what it will be." He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"We should talk about it, though. Have a family meeting or whatever we're calling it."

"What you want is always the main priority, Chloe. But I'm pretty sure we're all on the same page. I caught Ryker scouting out which window to install a patio and where we need fences for the dogs we're apparently getting a few days ago."

I smile because I can picture it. Ryker heard me say one time that I want pets after going my whole life without having one, and he took that as his own personal mission to make it happen.

How the hell did I get so lucky?

The man himself appears with Ronan by his side. They're chatting as if we didn't just take out the people that wanted us dead, including Ronan's father.

Sadly, none of my guys were responsible for taking Mikayla out. Instead, she seems to have been caught in some crossfire while we were dealing with Salvatore.

I was worried we might face some blowback from her employers, but King assures me that we'll be okay. As far as they know, this was a family dispute gone wrong, and they'll have no idea we know about the trafficking ring, at least not until we start dismantling it.

The guys catch sight of us and don't hesitate to make their way toward us, each dropping a kiss to my lips before standing beside us and watching the crew dump a body in the back of a van.

"Where's Damon?" I ask.

"Camilla's grilling him about his intentions with you." Ryker smirks.

A surprised giggle bursts from my chest. I would kill to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. "Has she done that with the rest of you?"

"Yep." Ronan chuckles. "She's a violent little thing, I'll give her that. The colorful threats were impressive."

"I thought the same thing," Ryker says. "I think she could give us some tips and tricks for the most painful way to torture a man."

Kingston's laugh vibrates through me. "You're lucky to have her, Mama."

"I'm lucky to have all of you," I whisper, tears gathering at the corners of my eyes at how true the words are.

His arms tighten around me. "We're far luckier to have you."

Damon appears, his eyes a little shell-shocked as he joins us. "She's fucking crazy."

"Kovu has rubbed off on her a lot," I admit.

"The description she gave of how she would dismember me if I hurt you will live in my nightmares for the rest of my life."

"Better not hurt me then, huh?"

He moves in front of me and cups my cheek in his hand, forcing me to look up into his intense eyes. "Never," he promises. "Never again."

"Time to move out. Apparently it's a nice night in Miami to blow shit up." Kingston gives me one final squeeze before Ryker takes my hand and

tugs me toward a waiting SUV.

I really can’t wait to get home and start our life together.

I have a feeling it’s going to be everything I ever dreamed of.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

# DAMON

NOW

There was a time when all I wanted was the kingdom inside these four walls.

I would kill anyone that got in my way of the legacy that awaited me.

But walking through the halls of the compound now, all I feel is relief that this is the end of this place.

The ghosts and bad memories are littered through every room I walk into, searching for anything sentimental that we might want to keep while Ryker waits with Chloe in the car.

We were only able to get him to agree to sit this part out because we promised he could play with the explosives when it came time to blow it up.

The guards Dad left behind were easy to take out, and we barely broke a sweat in the process, leaving us with free rein of the compound to get what we have to do.

Chloe tried to come in with us, wanting to support Ronan and me, but nothing good could come from her coming inside, and we quickly convinced her that staying in the car was the best call.

Stepping into my mother's library, my heart aches for the woman who never got to see her sons break free of our father's chains.

I'd like to think she's looking down on us, proud that we're ridding the world of everything he loved.

Dropping the box I’m carrying onto the table in the corner, I start pulling the books she read to us as children and the ones she and Chloe used to read together.

It’s more than I would like to take from the house, but it feels disrespectful to her to not keep these things.

I gather the photo frames from the wall and the knickknacks from her travels, and then I step into the hallway and almost run straight into Kingston.

He’s been in Dad’s office grabbing documents and packing up the computers and hard drives just in case we ever need them as leverage, but he looks more haunted than I can ever remember seeing him.

“Are you okay?”

He nods, glancing down at the box where a photo of him and Mom rests. He reaches for it, brushing his fingers over the glass gently. “If these walls could talk…”

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to say a proper goodbye.”

“The hardest part of the funeral was not being able to be there for you and your brother. Standing back, watching as you both struggled to remain stoic, it was torture. But mostly I regret leaving her here with him. I allowed her to suffer by disappearing.”

I shake my head. “You did what you had to do, and she was never mad at you. She never blamed you, even when everyone around her tried to convince her that the accident was your fault. You were her best friend until the day she died.”

Emotion creeps through my chest, and for once I don’t try to force it down.

I spent my whole life repressing my feelings, never allowing myself to process the things I felt, but I don’t have to do that anymore.

No one is going to disown or beat me for having emotions, and that thought only makes my chest tighter.

“She’d be proud of you, Damon.” Kingston grasps my shoulder, his own eyes misty. “And I’m proud of you too, for what it’s worth.”

Without thinking, I place the box on the floor and wrap my arms around him.

I can’t remember the last time I hugged anyone other than Chloe. Years, maybe even decades, but when his arms tighten around me, I can’t help but think about how good it feels.

He pats my back a couple of times before we pull away and he picks up the box. “You almost ready to get out of here?”

“So fucking ready,” I reply. “I just need to go up to the attic to grab the stuff I saved for Chloe.”

“I’ll drop this at the car, and then we’ll let Ryker loose with the explosives.”

I roll my eyes. “That motherfucker got a little too excited about this.”

“He’s very good at blowing stuff up, he just doesn’t get the opportunity that often.”

Shaking my head, I make my way to the back of the house and tug the hatch open. It’s been a long time since I’ve been up here, probably since I stashed this stuff, but it’s exactly where I left it ten years ago.

The memory of packing things as quickly as I could manage, trying my best not to think about why I would do something so stupid for someone I claimed to hate. I knew I wouldn’t have much time before my father’s men came in and threw everything out, and there was a voice in the back of my head telling me I couldn’t let that happen.

Photo albums and frames, along with every trophy Chloe ever won, sit in hastily packed boxes. Every gift Ronan ever bought her and sentimental things from our childhood were shoved in duffel bags. I’m so fucking glad I listened to that voice when it was drilled into me to ignore it. Having a conscience was one of the things my father loathed most about a person, but I’m grateful he never quite managed to beat mine out of me.

I carry the boxes and bags to the car with Chloe’s favorite stuffed bear under my arm. He’s a little dusty, but I’m sure we can get him cleaned up.

She’s sitting on the edge of the back seat with Kingston and Ronan piling things into the trunk.

Her eyes light up when they see me, but when they drop to the stuffy under my arm, tears burst to the surface.

“Oh my god, you kept Franklin,” she cries.

I pass off the boxes to Ronan and hold him out to her. The light brown bear has been dragged around most of her life, and knowing I picked it out for her when I was five makes my chest warm. Even after I pushed her away, seeing her with that damn bear filled me with so much damn pride I could barely contain it, but I always managed because it was what kept her safest.

Chloe holds the dusty bear against her chest, and I tug her into my arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Who’s ready to blow some shit up?” Ryker hoots as he sprints out the front door of the only home I’d ever known until recently.

We made sure to park a safe distance from the main house so we don’t bother to take cover as we each lean against the side of the car.

“You want to do it?” Ryker holds the detonator out to me but I shake my head.

“It’s all yours.”

The explosion vibrates through the ground, the heat of the flames licking against our faces even from this distance but none of us says a word as we watch it burn.

Because although we’ll be untangling webs of deals our father made for the coming months and smoothing our relationships where we can, this is the final physical part of the Lombardi empire, and I can’t help but notice how light I feel now it’s gone.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

# CHLOE

NOW

Tears roll down my cheeks long before I get out of the car.

The sun is just starting to rise as Kingston pulls the car into the cemetery and toward the Lombardi section.

We've already decided we're not going to bury Salvatore here. He doesn't deserve to rest in peace in the crypt he had built for himself after I ran, and he certainly doesn't deserve to be buried beside Caroline.

I'm actually not sure what happened to his body during the cleanup. Ronan checked his pulse to make sure he was dead, and then we walked away to check on the rest of our family.

I nibble at my bottom lip, desperately clinging to my composure. I gave up on ever visiting my parents' resting place a long time ago, mostly because I assumed their bodies were burned or thrown to the gators.

When Damon told me he convinced his father it was for the best that the Weavers be buried in the family plot for appearance's sake, I broke down.

He spent so long convincing everyone around him that his heart was stone, and yet at every turn he was doing something thoughtful.

The car comes to a stop, but none of us move to get out immediately.

As excited as we are to get out of Miami, none of us want to rush this moment.

It's too important.

“Are you ready, Duchess?” Damon asks, squeezing my hand.

I nod and allow him to help me from the SUV. I’m perfectly capable of getting out myself, but I am a little sore from my sprint through the city, and if I’m honest, I love having their hands on me.

Despite spending the whole drive preparing myself for this moment, nothing could have prepared me to see my parents’ headstones right beside Caroline’s, and Damon’s arm around my waist is the only thing that keeps me on my feet.

A sob tears from my chest, and I don’t bother trying to swallow it. The emotions rioting through my chest are too big to withhold, and I don’t have to do that anymore.

Not when I have four men who will catch me if I fall.

Kingston wraps his arms around me from behind while Ronan takes my other side as we stare at the final resting place of three of the most important people in our lives.

Being here hurts more than I ever could have imagined, but it also allows something deep inside to ease. I didn’t realize how badly I needed closure.

“Thank you for having them buried here,” I choke out through another rough sob.

“They belonged here with Mom,” Damon replies, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “And this way she didn’t have to be alone anymore.”

I turn my face into his shoulder and cry.

I cry for the person I was a decade ago when I watched my parents be killed.

I cry for the baby that never came into the world.

And I cry for the scared woman I was for all these years. Too afraid to live. Too afraid to love.

For a long time, I thought I’d never be happy again. I thought my heart was too broken to feel anything other than sorrow, but it turns out all I needed was the love of four men who would tear down the whole world if they thought it would make me happy.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

# KINGSTON

NOW

Ryker hands me three bouquets of flowers he acquired in the last twenty minutes, and I don't bother asking how that's possible.

Some days I question whether he has some sort of magic I don't know about, but it doesn't really matter how he got them, only that we have them to lay on their graves.

The emotion clogging my throat is thick.

There's so much I want to say, but none of it feels like enough.

I want to tell Caroline how sorry I am that I didn't stick around to protect her all those years ago, but I also want to tell her how proud she would be of her boys and how beautiful their love for Chloe has become.

I want to tell Neil and Iris how sorry I am that I didn't save them and that I'll always protect their daughter. That I'll love her through every single season life throws at us and give her everything she could ever want out of life.

And I want to tell all three of them about how we burned it all to the ground. Or in the compound's case, blew it sky-high.

It was satisfying as hell watching that place be reduced to ash, and I wasn't the only one that felt it. Getting to do it together just made it all the sweeter.

I kneel and carefully place the bouquets by the headstones. By the time I lean back on my heels, Chloe is kneeling beside me, her fingers moving over the lush grass.

There's a reason the Lombardis have been buried here for as long as the family has been in Miami. They take care of the grounds better than any other cemetery I've ever visited.

She takes my hand and squeezes, giving me as much comfort as she's seeking for herself.

"They'd be so proud of you, Mama," I murmur.

"I know."

"And they would be happy that you're finally living for yourself again."

She looks up at me through watery eyes with a wobbly smile. "I wish they could see the life we're building. I wish Dad was here to be freaked out about me being with four men only to accept it when he realized how happy it made me. I wish Mom was here to help me through whatever comes next. The idea of a wedding or kids or whatever else is in our future terrifies me to not have her guidance. And I wish Caroline was here to see her sons finally out from under Salvatore's thumb."

Tears roll down her cheeks, and I brush them away with my thumb as I cup her jaw. "They're here. They're always with us, and they'll always be by your side through those scary moments and all the ones in between."

Damon sits behind her, tugging her into his lap, while Ronan takes her other side and Ryker sits behind us, a quiet support as we grieve together.

Through the tears and the quiet memories we share between moments of silence, I thank whoever smiled down on us the day they decided we would end up together.

Four men who couldn't stand one another and the woman that their lives orbited around.

Unconventional? Sure.

But I've never felt anything quite so right in my life and I won't take a second of this life for granted.

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

# RYKER

NOW

Everyone was exhausted by the time we made it back to the jet to head home, and we were barely in the air when they fell asleep, but I can't close my eyes.

Although I didn't have the same emotional connection to this trip, I can't help but feel like it shifted something in our dynamic.

We worked together at every turn. We didn't bicker the way we would have a few weeks ago, and when someone needed support, we gave it to them without hesitation.

I've also realized how difficult it is going to be for me moving forward to let Chloe out of my sight.

Those hours when she was traveling to and from Miami were pure fucking torture, and I need a much more permanent solution to tracking her if I'm ever going to let her go anywhere without me.

Thankfully Corbin had a spare tracker like the ones Kingston insists on his men having in his kit. It tracks heart rate and body temperature, and he was kind enough to give it to me. Or more accurately, decided it wasn't worth getting shot over.

Glancing across the aisle, I meet icy blue eyes, and none of the annoyance I used to feel when I looked at him shows itself.

I can't believe I'm starting to like this asshole.

Chloe’s curled up on Kingston’s lap, her head resting on his shoulder as they both get some much-needed rest, but I’m desperate to have my hands on her.

There’s something about blowing shit up that makes me horny as hell.

“Thanks for everything you did today, man,” Damon says quietly.

I blink a few times, certain I’m asleep and this is a dream or I’m hallucinating, but when an irritated look crosses his face, I surmise that I am awake and hell doesn’t appear to have frozen over. “You’re welcome,” I reply, swallowing every asshole retort that forces its way to the surface. “How do you feel?”

He leans back in his seat with his arms crossed over his chest and sighs. “Lighter. Like the weight of the world is no longer resting on my shoulders and I can truly breathe for the first time in my life.”

A soft groan pulls our attention to Chloe as she unfolds herself from Kingston’s lap with an adorable frown.

She’s so fucking cute when she wakes up. Hell, she’s cute all the time, but especially when she’s rumpled and sleepy.

“You okay, Siren?” I ask as she crosses to where I’m sitting and perches herself straddling my lap.

My cock jerks in my pants. It’s been perpetually hard since I found out it was Chloe who killed Salvatore. Something about my girl landing a headshot really got me going, and the only time it settled down was when we were at the cemetery.

Thank God.

If I didn’t already have a one-way ticket to hell waiting for me, I sure as hell would if I had a boner while watching the people I care for most in the world grieve.

Not even I’m that much of an asshole.

A soft moan escapes as her hips grind down on me, making my eyes widen.

“Seems our girl is feeling a little needy,” Damon says.

Pressing a kiss to her throat, I nip at the sensitive skin beneath her ear. “Do you want us to take you to the bed in the back and take the edge off, baby girl?”

She barely gets a chance to nod before I’m on my feet with her legs wrapped around my waist and I’m carrying her toward the closed door at the back of the jet.

I glance over my shoulder at Damon watching us with the same hunger burning through me. “You coming?”

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

# CHLOE

NOW

Maybe it's the idea of being truly free for the first time in years, or maybe it's just because I have four impossibly hot boyfriends that know exactly how to get me going, but when I woke up, all I could think about was climbing one of them like a tree.

Lucky for me, two were available, even if it is the two most likely to kill one another.

Ryker drops me in the middle of the bed as Damon steps into the room and closes the door behind him. Their heated stares glide over my body, sending a shiver of need to my core.

The way they look at me is addictive and I hope it never changes.

Leaning up on my elbows, I drag my bottom lip between my teeth, desperately trying to stop myself from begging them to touch me.

As badly as I need their hands on me, I know better than to rush them. They'll give me everything my body needs just the way they always do.

"God, you're beautiful," Damon murmurs.

"Strip for us, Siren," Ryker adds.

I drag in an unsteady breath and push myself up, tugging my sweatshirt over my head before I can lose my nerve.

It's silly feeling self-conscious around them when they look at me like I'm their reason for breathing, but I'm not sure it will ever stop being

overwhelming to have their undivided attention.

Their eyes flare when they realize I wasn't wearing a bra, and each reaches forward, brushing their thumbs over my peaked nipples.

A needy whine escapes me, making them smirk smugly.

Who knew they could work together so seamlessly?

"No bra?" Damon asks.

I shake my head. "I just wanted to be comfortable."

We each took turns showering when we got back to the jet. Even with as much distance as we kept from the fire at the compound, we all stank of smoke, and I needed to wash the whole day from my skin.

I killed a man today.

The father of two of my guys.

Even though he deserved it for everything he did, all the pain he caused the people I love, it's still weighing on me more than I would like.

He gives me an understanding nod. "Pants off, pretty girl."

Shoving my sweatpants and panties down my legs at the same time, I throw them across the room and lean back against the soft sheets.

"How do you want us, Chloe?" Damon asks, tugging his shirt over his head in one smooth movement. "Do you want one of us to fuck your pretty pussy while the other fucks your mouth? Or do you feel like something a little more…intense?"

Heat spreads through my body, a trail of pink moving over my skin and making them both chuckle.

"I think she wants the latter," Ryker says as he crosses to his duffel bag in the corner. "You want one of us in your pussy and the other in your ass, Siren?"

A moan slips from between my lips, because I'm not sure I've ever wanted anything more than I want that.

"I'll take that as a yes." He chuckles as he pulls a small bottle of lube from his bag along with something he keeps out of sight.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask what it is, but before I get the chance, Damon's standing before me naked, stroking his hard length as his eyes move over my bare skin.

Why is it so hot that he's pleasuring himself while staring at me?

His free hand drags over my sensitive skin, leaving a trail of desperation in its path.

Wetness gathers between my thighs, but I force myself to remain still and wait for further instructions.

“So fucking pretty,” Ryker croons, shucking his clothing in a pile with mine and Damon’s.

**Settle in with a love story.**

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous for this, not because I don’t want it, but because they’re both stubborn, and the last thing I want is to be the reason for more of the animosity between them.

“You want her pussy or ass?” Damon asks, glancing up at the other man.

“Ass,” he replies immediately, and instead of arguing the way I expect him to, Damon lifts me from the bed with ease before sitting on the edge with me straddling his lap.

His hardness presses against my clit, and my hips grind back and forth, my need for release growing by the second.

Damon’s hands tighten on my hips, but instead of stopping me, he guides my movements. “That’s it, Duchess. Use my cock. Make yourself come for us.”

“Oh fuck,” I moan, my release so close I can almost taste it.

It’s not lost on me that it used to take me at least twenty minutes to get myself off, but my guys seem to be able to make me come on demand.

Not that I’m complaining.

I fucking love how well they know my body.

“Good girl,” he murmurs against the shell of my ear. “You’re doing so good, Duchess. I can’t wait to slide inside your perfect cunt, but I need you to come for us first.”

My core clenches and my hips stutter, but his huge hands are right there, keeping me moving exactly the way we both need.

“You’re soaking my cock, baby. So fucking wet. So fucking perfect.”

I bury my head in his throat, clutching onto his shoulders for balance as my release barrels toward me.

Ryker's hands run down my back, leaving a shiver in their wake. "Tilt her hips a little," he says softly, and Damon shifts me without hesitation.

The fact they haven't snapped anything snarky at one another yet is nothing short of a miracle, but they don't give me a chance to truly appreciate it before Ryker's thick fingers are brushing over my tight ring of muscles.

I cry out, my orgasm rushing toward me with so much force it steals the air from my lungs.

"There it is," Damon rumbles. "You're so desperate to get our cocks inside you, aren't you, baby?"

"Yes!"

Ryker's fingers disappear for a moment, and when they return, they're covered in a thick coat of lube.

I'm still lost in the fog of my release when he slips a thick finger inside me and then I'm screaming with a second orgasm right on top of the first.

"Holy fuck," Damon growls.

"Oh, you are worked up, aren't you, Siren?" Ryker chuckles against the shell of my ear as he slides a second finger inside me beside the first. "Did all that violence today get our girl all hot and bothered?"

"Yes," I sob into Damon's throat. "Fuck, yes."

They each let out a string of curses as the cap of the bottle is clicked open behind me.

"Our perfect match," Ryker grunts as he gives himself a few rough strokes.

"Put me inside you, baby," Damon grinds out.

I slip my hand between us, my cheeks heating when I feel how wet I am, but I quickly shake it off and notch the head of him against my entrance.

"Slide down nice and slow for me, Duchess."

Swallowing heavily, I lower myself onto his hardness, a deep groan escaping me at the delicious stretch. "Oh god," I sob, biting down on his shoulder to stop myself from screaming.

Ryker chuckles, positioning himself against my back and dragging his cock over the puckered hole. "You'd be better off screaming for the devil when you're pressed between us, Siren."

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## CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

# RYKER

NOW

Sharing Chloe with Damon is…easy.

I'm not sure if it's because we're so locked in on giving her as much pleasure as possible, or if it's something else entirely, but I have more pressing things on my mind other than how well I fuck my girl with someone I loathed just a few weeks ago.

Damon stills her hips, not allowing her to grind on him the way she so desperately wants. We'll give her everything she needs once we're both inside her.

"Take a breath for me, Siren. I'll tell you when to let it out."

She rests her head against his throat and does as she's told.

I notch myself against the tight rosebud and push gently. "Let it out, baby."

My head slips in with ease, dragging a rough groan from all three of us.

"God, you're so tight," I rumble, sinking inside her as slowly as I can force myself to.

"You're doing so good," Damon praises. "Look at how well you take us."

"More," she sobs. "I need more. Please. More."

"Fuck me," I grind out. I'm going to embarrass myself if she keeps that shit up.

“That’s what I’m asking you to do,” she sasses.

I huff out a laugh and spank her ass playfully, pulling a strangled moan from her. “Be patient, little brat.”

Dragging in a stuttered breath, I sink the rest of the way inside her until she’s filled to the brim.

“Jesus,” Damon groans, clutching her hips so hard I won’t be surprised if she wears the marks for the next few days.

Once we’ve caught our breath, I withdraw a few inches before pressing back into her at the same time he helps her grind on him.

It takes a couple of tries to find our rhythm, but soon Chloe moves between us like the goddess that she is, her ass clenching down on me as she gets closer to her release.

I rest my hand on the back of her head and use the other to drag a disinfectant wipe over the back of her shoulder, but she’s too lost to the fog of pleasure to ask what I’m doing.

Which is probably for the best seeing as I haven’t run this past any of the guys or Chloe.

But you know what they say, sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission.

Damon’s knowing eyes track my movements as I reach for the device Corbin gave me to administer the tracker, and he pries one of his hands from her hip to replace my hand on the back of her head, holding her steady as we grind in and out of her body.

“Look at you taking our cocks like a good whore,” he murmurs against her ear, causing her to clench down on us.

I hiss through my teeth and position the nozzle against her shoulder.

No going back now.

I press down on the trigger, and the bite of pain from the insertion is all she needs to throw her over the edge and drag us both over with her.

Her cries fill the small room and I’m certain the others have woken up by now because our girl is anything but quiet.

“That’s it, Duchess,” Damon grunts, fucking up into her as he chases the last of his pleasure and prolongs hers.

Hot ropes of cum fill her ass, and I lose all rhythm as stars burst into my vision. Every orgasm I have with Chloe feels like the most intense of my life, but I’m beginning to think it might just be normal for us.

I drop the device to the bed, trying not to put too much of my weight on Chloe as I drag in ragged breaths.

Jesus.

Her ass pulses around my oversensitive cock, and I'm as desperate to keep myself lodged inside her as I am to see my cum drip out of her, but ultimately, I have no choice but to pull out.

Damon drops back onto the bed with her still wrapped in his arms while I collapse beside them.

"Did you just inject our girl with a tracker without consulting any of us?" Damon asks as he turns his head to look at me.

"Yep."

Chloe's eyes meet mine with surprise, but there's no anger behind the pretty green. "Ryker," she huffs.

I reach over and brush my fingers over her cheek, reveling in the feel of her softness. "I need to know you're safe at all times, Chloe. I just about lost my mind when we lost your signal today."

She sighs, leaning into my hand. "You're overprotective, but I kind of love it."

I huff out a laugh. "That's probably a good thing seeing as you've found yourself with four men that will stop at nothing to keep you safe."

She shakes her head before resting her cheek against Damon's chest. "I wouldn't have you guys any other way."

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## CHAPTER SEVENTY

# RONAN

### NOW

It's not uncommon for us to wake up and find Chloe has already gotten up, and despite trying to implement a rule that she has to tell one of us where she's going, she's never once done it.

Padding down the stairs, I glance toward the library Kingston had installed for her last week and find it empty, so I continue through to the living area.

King's been organizing renovations one room at a time to make sure we each have the space we need so we don't end up killing each other, but unsurprisingly he's prioritizing Chloe.

I frown when I don't find her in the kitchen or on the couch, but then I see her.

She's ankle-deep in the ocean, her attention focused on the horizon with her arms wrapped around herself.

It's been freezing the last few weeks since we've been back in Maine, but my girl never lets it stop her from going outside. I guess those years in New York helped prepare for this, but I'll admit I'm struggling.

Going from Florida to Maine weather has been a far bigger adjustment than I expected.

I tug on a sweater from the coat rack by the door and head outside. The cool sea breeze brushes over my face, but it's a nice morning, albeit

freezing.

My bare feet carry me across the sand until I'm standing beside Chloe, trying not to wince at how cold the ocean is.

Maybe I should be worried about her losing a toe from hypothermia.

"What have we told you about coming outside without us?"

Big green eyes look up at me, and I can't help but think how fucking lucky I am to be loved by her. She's so beautiful I can hardly believe she's real, let alone that she's mine, and I'll never take it for granted. Not for a single minute.

"Sorry. It's just so beautiful here."

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and tug her against me. I'm not too proud to admit that I need her body heat to stop me from running back inside. "It truly is."

"Are you happy?"

Huffing out a laugh, I consider how to answer that question, but I don't know that "happy" is a strong enough word. "I have everything I've ever wanted right here in my arms. How could I not be?"

"But you've lost a lot through all of this. I don't want you to regret being here. I don't want you to regret the choices that brought you here."

I'm shaking my head before she can finish, because can't she see that she is the center of my universe?

"I promise I'm happy with every choice that I've made. I'm happy here with you and the guys. I'm happy I no longer have the Lombardi name hanging around my neck like a noose. And I'm happy that I'll get to spend the rest of my life making my own choices, instead of having my path chosen for me by a man I can't stand. I wake up every morning excited for the day ahead, and I can't see that ever changing."

"I love you," she whispers.

"I love you, too." I drop a kiss to the top of her head. "Now, how about we go inside and make breakfast for the others? You know what Damon's like if he doesn't eat the second he wakes up."

"He does wake up hangry, doesn't he?"

"Probably has something to do with his insatiable girlfriend."

Her cheeks heat, but she doesn't deny it. "What can I say? When you've got four boyfriends as hot as you guys, your libido reflects it."

I chuckle and turn her to head up the beach, just to pause when we find the others standing on the deck watching us.

“You’re never going to get a moment of peace with us around, Sparrow.”

A smile tugs at her lips as tears gather in her eyes. “The only time I ever feel at peace is with all of you.”

Life may be different to how we pictured it when we were teenagers, but I can’t help but think this is exactly how it was always meant to be.

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# EPILOGUE

## CHLOE

### SIX MONTHS LATER

I come to a stop in the entryway as I try to process what I'm looking at.

Am I still asleep and this is some kind of dream?

Or is Ryker really standing in the middle of the living room with our kitten under one arm and a chicken under the other.

Kingston is going to lose his shit if he finds the bird in the house again after my unhinged golden retriever let the six of them wander around last week.

Apparently, it was to help Benny, the kitten, get used to them.

I'm still not clear why he's trying to socialize the animals, but I pick my battles when it comes to him.

"Siren," he greets me with a wide smile. "I thought you were napping."

"I woke up." I shrug. "Want to explain what's happening here?"

"Jane is feeling a little under the weather, so I thought she would be more comfortable inside. But then Benny wanted to play, and Jane isn't feeling up to playing, so I'm holding them both until they calm down."

Did I mention he named the chickens after classic literary characters? Honestly, I'm still not clear about how we got chickens in the first place. They just kind of appeared one day, and none of us questioned it.

I nod slowly, but I'm just as confused as I was when I first stepped into the room. "How about we take Jane outside to the winter coop so she can

have some downtime where it’s warm, and then Benny can have his house back?”

His eyes flare with panic, and my brow dips. He’s acting weirder than normal, and that’s saying something for Ryker.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing!” He turns and carefully places the kitten on the couch before hustling toward the back door.

Frowning, I pause to give Benny a pat before following him outside. As much as chickens weren’t my first choice in pets, the girls have grown on me, and anxiety rolls through my belly at the idea that something is wrong with one of them and he didn’t want to be the one to tell me.

I round the side of the house and stop dead when I find all four of my guys huddled together in deep discussion.

What the hell is going on?

Kingston has been away for the last few days, and the brothers left early this morning to do some research for Hawk Securities.

My guys are home more often than not, but it’s not in their nature to not work, and it’s good for them to leave our little slice of heaven every now and then.

Ronan spots me first, and he quickly turns around, giving me his back as he obviously tries to hide something from me.

They have a lot of wonderful qualities, but I can’t say surprises is one of them.

“You’re home early,” I say warily to Kingston. “I thought you weren’t back until tonight.”

“I just couldn’t wait to get home to you.” He smiles, sweeping me into a hug that allows my body to truly relax for the first time since he left.

I don’t think I’ll ever stop being scared that they won’t come home to me, but it comes with the territory of being with four of the most lethal men in the country.

“I missed you,” I admit.

“I missed you too, Mama.”

“Do you want to tell me why you guys are being so suspicious?”

He huffs out a chuckle. “What are the chances you’ll turn your perky ass around and go back inside until we’re ready for you?”

“Zero,” I reply with a smirk.

“That’s what I figured.” He sighs, glancing over his shoulder at the others. His body blocks my view of whatever they’re doing, which was probably the purpose of the hug in the first place.

“You didn’t let Ryker buy cows, did you? I thought we agreed there wasn’t enough space for them.”

Kingston laughs. “No, we managed to talk him down from that idea.”

“Okay, we’re ready,” Ronan calls out, and King slowly unfolds me from his arms, allowing me to peek around him to where the three of them are kneeling.

Ryker still holds Jane, while Ronan has a puppy under his arm and Damon holds a ring box.

Kingston moves to kneel beside Ryker with an envelope I hadn’t noticed him holding before.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, my hand covering my mouth as my eyes flick between them.

“Did you know I was planning to propose to you when we spent the Christmas together after you disappeared?” Ronan asks but doesn’t give me a chance to respond as he sets the tiny ball of fluff to the grass and it toddles toward me. “I saw a video of a guy that proposed to his girlfriend with a puppy, and I knew that that’s how I wanted to ask you to marry me.”

I scoop the puppy into my arms and bury my face in its soft fur before dropping down to my knees in front of them.

“You’re meant to stay standing for this part,” Ryker points out.

“I don’t care, keep going.”

Damon shakes his head, but there’s a smile on his lips that I’ve been seeing a lot of the last six months. “I grew up having every choice made for me. I was never free to choose anything, let alone who I was going to marry. But when I closed my eyes at night, it was always you in the big white dress standing at the altar with me.”

“I never wanted to get married,” Ryker admits. “I was content with my life the way it was and had no intention of ever changing it. But then you came along and changed everything. Suddenly all I could think about was tying you to me for the rest of our lives and giving you everything you’ve ever wanted. Including a gaggle of animals.”

A watery laugh escapes, and the puppy presses its wet nose to my throat. This is the most chaotic proposal, but what else did I expect from my guys?

“I went about it the wrong way the last time I asked you to marry me, and I’ll regret that for the rest of my life, but I hope when you think about the day we asked you to marry us, it’ll be this moment you think of.”

“It’ll be hard to forget a proposal that involved a chicken and a puppy,” I admit.

“Will you marry us, Mama? Will you do us the great honor of being our wife?”

I bite down on my bottom lip, but there’s no softening the grin that tugs at my cheeks. “I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

The puppy and I are enveloped in a hug, and somehow a ring is slid onto my finger before I can pull away and look at it.

A gasp falls from my lips when I finally manage a glance. It’s perfect. A large diamond in the center and four smaller ones surrounding it.

“Do you like it, Duchess?”

“I love it,” I choke out. “And I love you all.”

Kingston holds out the envelope he was holding, and I hesitate to take it.

“You’ve already given me a ring and a puppy,” I point out.

“Just one more surprise,” he promises.

I take it from him, unfolding the paperwork that was inside, but with each word I read, the more my brow dips.

“What is this?” I whisper.

“Change of name paperwork for each of us,” Kingston replies.

“You want to take Weaver as a last name? All of you?”

Ronan brushes a tear from my cheek. “Damon and I want to drop the final piece of our past, and when we talked about which name we would take, it seemed obvious that we would take yours. You are the center of our universe, so why wouldn’t we all take your name?”

A sob tears from my chest, and I’m quickly tugged into his arms as Damon wraps his around the both of us.

Never in a million lifetimes did I imagine I could be so lucky, and not for the first time I thank whoever chose this path for us.

I can’t wait to see what the future holds for our little mismatched family that I wouldn’t trade for anything.

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# THANK YOU

Thank you for reading Stay Little Fighter! And just like that, the Lombardi Legacy trilogy is complete! There may be some bonus content down the track so keep an eye on my socials for that!

If you enjoyed Stay Little Fighter, it would mean the world to me if you could review it on Amazon, Goodreads, Social Media, carrier pigeon, I'm not fussy.

You can follow me on Facebook and Instagram or my reader group, for sneak peaks of future projects, including release dates and secret snippets!

Curious about Camilla and her men? Start Syndicate of the Legion, A Bestselling Dark Mafia Why Choose Series, with In the Shadows here! Keep reading for a sneak peak!

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What. A. Ride.

I know I've made a bit of a name for myself for cliffhangers and emotional damage, but I think I outdid myself with this one.

There's so much I want to say, and yet I can't quite find the words for how much I loved writing this story and these characters. From the first time Damon and Ronan stepped onto the page, I knew they would have their story told, but I never could have imagined that this is where they would lead me.

It feels fitting that book 25 in my author journey would be a special one, and I'm endlessly grateful for every single person that has picked up one of my books.

To Mr. Fyre who keeps the wheels turning whenever I'm on a deadline. Who had to bribe me with snacks to hit my deadline for this book. Thank you for putting up with my trash panda chaos and loving me through it.

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# PROLOGUE

## CAMILLA

Most girls get a big party for their eighteenth birthday.

They get gifts and loving words from their friends and family. They get to spend the day with their loved ones, showering them with attention and celebrating their coming into adulthood.

Not me, though.

No. Instead of a big party, I got told today's my wedding day. I'm marrying a man I've never met, one who's twenty years my senior, to pay a debt my father has owed since I was still in my mother's stomach.

I'm not stupid, I know arranged marriage is normal for families like mine, expected even. I just never thought I would fall victim to one. But maybe I should have known. Now that I think back on the last eighteen years, there are things that don't make sense, moments when my father looked at me with sadness at a time when everyone else felt nothing but happiness.

He waited until today to tell me. I'm not sure whether to be mad that he's ruined my birthday or happy I got to live in blissful ignorance up until the very last moment. All I know is that this morning when I came down for breakfast, I was met with my father's dejected eyes and the news I had just spent my last night in my own bed and woke up for the last time in the home I grew up in.

As far as Mafia lives go, ours has always been fairly normal. Or at least I think it has based on what I've seen of the other families in New York. Sure, we have security twenty-four-seven, and yes, I do have to log every movement I make before I make it, but I've been free to make my own

choices up until now. I haven't been bound by generations of tradition to play the dutiful daughter.

Or at least that's what I thought. Now I think I've been led up the garden path into a world of false security, only to have the rug pulled out from under me. I thought I would take my father's place eventually. He's been training me for that eventuality for as long as I can remember, but now I'm not sure why he bothered. If he always planned to hand me over, why not spend that time training my cousin to take his place?

"Camilla," Chloe, our housekeeper, says from behind me, and I realize I've been staring into my suitcase, completely unaware of the world going on around me while mine stands still. My future is scary and uncertain, and I don't know how to navigate everything that comes next. "It's going to be okay, sweetheart." She rubs my shoulder, but I can't drag my attention from the clothes piled in the bag I took to Paris last month.

Will I ever be able to travel again?

Will I get the chance to complete my bucket list?

Or will I become a baby farm until my usefulness wears out? Until I've produced enough heirs for Charles Davenport to pass his legacy down to? When I'm no longer useful, will he let me go? Or will he kill me and dump my body at the bottom of the ocean?

I give Chloe a weak smile, but it doesn't reach my eyes. Hell, the thing barely even reaches my lips. I'm sad to leave the house I grew up in, but more than that, I'm sad to leave my family, because I have no idea when I'll see them again or if I will at all.

Chloe was my nanny growing up after my mother died of cancer when I was eight, and she effectively became my mom. She was patient and kind, and she guided me to be the best person I could, considering the family I was born into. But she never prepared me for being married off to a man in his late thirties and how to navigate that.

When I was old enough to look after myself, she decided to stay on staff. The perks when working for the De Marco family are pretty good, and although what she's told me has been limited, I've always wondered if there's something in Chloe's past she's running from. She's only ten years older than me, barely out of high school when she took on the position in our home, but there are stories in her eyes I've often wondered about.

Someone clears their throat by the door, and when I look up, I'm met with my father's regretful gaze. After he told me, I lost it. I yelled and

screamed and begged him not to make me go through with this, but he's already made up his mind. Hell, he made it up before I took my first breath. Why would I expect him to change it now?

I never bothered asking why he would do this. What could possibly be so important as marrying his oldest, and only, for that matter, daughter, off to someone as cold and terrifying as Charles?

"Camilla."

"Father." I drag my attention back to the task at hand. If I spend too much time looking at him, I'll break. I grew up in a Mafia family, and if there's one thing I learned over the last eighteen years, it's that weakness is a death sentence. He spent years teaching me how to live in this world, but nothing could have prepared me for this eventuality.

The door clicking shut pulls my eyes back up, and I find his own darting around the room. "We don't have much time."

"Until my new husband sends for me?" I sneer. The word leaves a bitter taste on my tongue, and bile rises in my throat. I've never thought much about getting married. I wasn't one of those little girls who dreamed of their wedding and their Prince Charming, but now I'm forced to consider my imminent vows and what they'll mean for my future. I almost scoff at myself. That's not the right word for the life sentence my father has given me.

Stupidly, I thought one day I would rule the De Marco kingdom. I'm my father's only child, and the only other person who could ever take the throne is my asshole cousin, Scott. But he's not fit to be king, and his father is never lucid enough to be of any threat to my position. But I guess I never considered the possibility of being traded like a piece of fucking meat either.

"You need to leave right now," he whispers, rushing toward me with an envelope I didn't see in his hand before. "There's a new identity, a plane ticket, and enough money to see you through a few months in here. You need to run as far and as fast as you can."

I stare at him blankly for long moments, because it sounds a lot like he's helping me escape, but that would mean double-crossing the Davenport family, and that in itself is a death sentence. "I don't understand."

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "There is a long story that comes with how you came to be promised to Charles, but I want you to know that I never wanted this to happen. I thought I'd be able to buy him

off, that I could offer him something else he may want, but as your birthday got closer, he's become more obsessed with you, and I can't send you to him. I refuse to have my baby girl fall into hands like his."

"But Dad—"

"No, Camilla. There's no time for arguments. I love that you have your mother's fire, but right now, I need you to go. Get out of New York, start a new life, and never look back."

I look over his shoulder at Chloe, who's zipping up my suitcase, and I realize she must have known about this when she was helping me pack. It makes sense. While I was aimlessly throwing shit anywhere it would fit, she was gathering necessities and packing them carefully in the same case. She was getting me ready to run.

I turn back to my father and nod before I've thought it through. "He's going to come for you," I whisper.

"Let him."

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